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MATTIE—A STRAY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"OWEN—A WAIF," "HOUSE OF ELMORE,"
"WOMAN'S RANSOM," ETC.

"By bestowing blessings upon others, we entail them upon ourselves."
HORACE SMITH.

NEW EDITION.

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CONTENTS.

BOOK I.

FIGURES IN OUTLINE.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	LIFE IN GREAT SUFFOLK STREET	1
II.	MATTIE	5
III.	LODGERS	12
IV.	MR. HINCHFORD'S EXPERIMENT.	16
V.	SET UP IN BUSINESS	22
VI.	THE END OF THE PROLOGUE	26

BOOK II.

THE NEW ESTATE.

I.	HOME FOR GOOD	32
II.	A GIRL'S ROMANCE	39
III.	OUR CHARACTERS	46
IV.	A NEW ADMIRER	50
V.	PERSEVERANCE	57
VI.	"IN THE FULNESS OF THE HEART," ETC.	61
VII.	CONFIDENCE	67
VIII.	SIDNEY STATES HIS INTENTIONS	76

BOOK III.

UNDER SUSPICION.

I.	AN OLD FRIEND	81
II.	STRANGE VISITORS TO GREAT SUFFOLK STREET	87
III.	SIDNEY'S SUGGESTION	96
IV.	PERPLEXITY	99
V.	MR. WESDEN TURNS ECCENTRIC	103
VI.	A BURST OF CONFIDENCE	108
VII.	THE PLAN FRUSTRATED.	114
VIII.	A SUDDEN JOURNEY	119
IX.	THE CLOUDS THICKEN	125
X.	MATTIE IN SEARCH	133
XI.	EXPLANATIONS	139
XII.	A SHORT WARNING	144
XIII.	LEAVE TAKINGS.	148

BOOK IV.

"WANT PLACES."

I.	ONE AND TWENTY	156
II.	SIDNEY'S CONFESSION	165
III.	A FLYING VISIT TO NUMBER THIRTY-FOUR	171
IV.	HIS TURN	181
V.	THE NEW BERTH	188

BOOK V.

STORM SIGNALS.

CHAPTER.		PAGE
I.	CAST DOWN	195
II.	IN WHICH SEVERAL DISCOVERIES COME TOGETHER	202
III.	FATHER AND DAUGHTER	208
IV.	ONLY PITY	214
V.	AN UNAVAILING EFFORT	219
VI.	MR. GRAY FURTHER DEVELOPED	224
VII.	A DINNER PARTY	230
VIII.	MATTIE'S CONFESSION	241

BOOK VI.

SIDNEY'S FRIENDS.

I.	MATTIE'S CHOICE	250
II.	MATTIE'S ADVISER	257
III.	THE OLD LOVERS	264
IV.	A NEW DECISION	269
V.	ANN PACKET EXPRESSES AN OPINION	275
VI.	MR. GRAY'S SCHEME	281

BOOK VII.

SIDNEY'S GRATITUDE.

I.	MAURICE HINCHFORD IN SEARCH OF HIS COUSIN	286
II.	MAURICE RECEIVES PLENTY OF ADVICE	291
III.	A DECLARATION	310
IV.	MORE TALK OF MARRIAGE AND GIVING IN MARRIAGE.	309
V.	MATTIE'S ANSWER	312

BOOK VIII.

MORE LIGHT.

I.	A NEW HOPE	317
II.	MATTIE IS TAKEN INTO CONFIDENCE	325
III.	HALF THE TRUTH	332
IV.	ALL THE TRUTH	338
V.	STRUGGLING	343
VI.	SIGNS OF CHANGE	348
VII.	RETURNED	355
VIII.	DECLINED WITH THANKS	360
IX.	MATTIE MEDIATRIX	366
X.	CONCLUSION	370

MATTIE: A STRAY.

BOOK I.

FIGURES IN OUTLINE

CHAPTER I.

LIFE IN GREAT SUFFOLK STREET.

It was not an evening party of the first water, or given by people of first-rate position in society, or held in a quarter whither the fashionable classes most do congregate. It was a small party—ostensibly a juvenile party—held on the first floor of a stationer's shop in Great Suffolk Street, Southwark.

Not even a first-rate stationer's, had the shutters been down and the fog less dense to allow us to inspect Mr. Wesden's wares; but an emporium, which did business in no end of things—cigars, tobacco-pipes, children's toys, glass beads by the skein or ounce, fancy work, cottons and tapes. These, the off-shoots from the stationery business, the news-vending, the circulating of novels in four, five, and six volumes at one penny per volume, if not detained more than three days; a stationery business which report said had not turned out badly for old Wesden, thanks to old Wesden's patience, industry and care, say we—thanks to his screwing and his close-fistedness that would not have trusted his own mother, had she lived, said the good people—for there are good people everywhere—in Great Suffolk Street. Certainly, there were but small signs of "close-fistedness" about the premises on that particular evening; the shop had been closed at an earlier hour than business

men would have considered suitable. They were wasting the gas in Mr. Wesden's drawing-room; feasting and revelry held dominion there. There had been three separate knocks given at the door from three separate Ganymedes—No. 1, with oranges; No. 2, with tarts from the pastry-cook; No. 3, with beer, which last was left in a tin can of colossal proportions, supper not being ready, and beer being liable to flatness in jugs—especially the beer from the "Crown."

We watch all this from the outside, in the thick fog which made things unpleasant in Great Suffolk Street. There is more life, and life that appertains to this chapter of our history, outside here than in that first floor front, where the sons and daughters of Mr. Wesden's neighbours are playing at forfeits, romping, jumping, and laughing, and thoroughly enjoying themselves. They are not thinking of the fog, the up-stairs folk shut away from the rawness of that January night; it would have troubled Mr. Wesden had his shop been open, and led him to maintain a stricter watch over the goods, and upon those customers whose faces might be strange to him; but he had forgotten the weather at that juncture, and sat in the corner of the drawing-room, smoking his pipe, and keeping his daughter—a bright-faced, golden-haired girl of twelve—within his range of vision. The fog and the cold troubled no one at Mr. Wesden's—only "outsiders" objected, and remarked upon them to friends when they met, coughing over one, and shivering through the other, as lungs and scanty clothes necessitated. The establishment of Mr. Wesden, stationer, troubled or attracted an outsider, though, who had passed and repassed it three or four times between the hours of eight and nine, p.m., and at half-past nine had backed into the recess of Mr. Wesden's doorway. A small outsider, of uncertain age—a boy, a nondescript, an anything, judging by the pinched white face and unkempt hair; a girl, by the rag of a frock that hung upon her, and from which her legs and feet protruded.

Subject matter of great interest was there for this small watcher—huddled in the doorway, clutching her elbows with her bony fingers, and listening at the keyhole, or varying proceedings now and then by stepping on to the clammy pavement, and looking up, through the fog, at the lighted blinds, once or twice indulging in a flat-footed kind of jig, to keep her feet warm. She was one of few loiterers in Great Suffolk Street that uncomfortable night—men, women, and boys hurried rapidly past, and thinned in number as the night stole on—only a policeman slouched by occasionally, and dismayed her somewhat, judging by her closer proximity to Mr. Wesden's street door, whenever his heavy tread jarred upon her nerves.

When the majority of the shops were closed, when the fog grew denser as the lights went out, and the few stragglers became more phantom-like and grey, quite a regiment of policemen marched

down Great Suffolk Street, changing places at certain corners with those officials who had done day-duty, and glad to have done, for that day at least.

The new policeman who crawled upon Mr. Wesden's side of the way was a sharper man than he who had left off crawling, and gone home at a gallop to his wife and thirteen children; for the new comer was not deceived by the deep doorway and the dense fog, but reached forth a hand and touched the figure cowering in the shadows.

A red-faced young man, with a bull neck, was this Suffolk Street official—an abrupt young man, who shook people rather violently by the shoulder, and hurt them.

"Oh!—stash that, please," ejaculated the child, at last; "you hurts!"

"What do you want here?"

"Nothin' partickler. If the young gal inside knows I'm here, she'll send out somethin' prime. That's all. Last thing, afore she goes to bed, she comes and looks, mostly. She's a good 'un."

"Ah! you'd better go home."

"Can't manage to make it up tuppence—and square the last penny with Mother Watts. You know Mother Watts?"

"Ah!"

"Well, she's down upon me, Watts is—so I can't go home."

"You must go somewhere—you can't stop here."

"Lor bless you, this is the comfortablest doorway in the street, if you don't mind, p'leesman. I often turn in here for the night, and some of you fine fellers lets a gal bide, and ain't so down upon her as you are. You're new to this beat."

"Am I, really?" was the ironical rejoinder.

"You used to do Kent Street and stir up Mother Watts. You locked up Mother Watts once—don't you remember?"

"Yes—I remember. Are you going?"

"If you won't let a gal stay, o' course I am. They've got a jolly kick-up here—that gal with the blue frock's birthday—old Wesden's gal, as I just told you about—I wish I was her! Did you ever see her of a Sunday?"

"Not that I know on."

"Just like the little gals at the play—spruce as carrots—and gloves on, and such boots! Fust rate, I can tell you."

"I wouldn't jaw any more, but go home," suggested the policeman.

"All right, master. I say, don't you twig how the fog has got on my chest?"

"Well, you *are* hoarse-ish."

"Spilt my woice yesterday, and made it wus by tryin' it on in Union Street to-day. Gave it up, and bought a haporth of lucifers, and got the boxes in my pocket now. Hard lines to-night, mate."

Familiarity breeds contempt and engenders rebuke. The loquacity of the child offended the official, who drew her from the doorway with a jerk, totally unexpected upon her side, and placed her in the roadway.

"Now be off from here—I've had enough of *you*."

"Werry well—why didn't you say so afore?"

And, without waiting for a reply to her query, the child went down Great Suffolk Street towards the Borough, sullenly and slowly. The policeman watched her vanish in the fog, and resumed his way; he had done his duty to society, and "moved on" one who had insulted it by her helplessness and squalor; there was a woman shrieking denunciations on the pot-man of the public-house at the corner—a man who had turned her unceremoniously into the street—let him proceed to business in a new direction.

Twenty steps on his way, and the ill-clad, sharp-visaged girl, stealing back in the fog to the welcome doorway whence he had abruptly expelled her.

"He's not everybody," she ejaculated, screwing herself comfortably into her old quarters, "though he thinks he is. I wonder what they're up to now? Don't I wish it was my buff-day, and somebody had somethink to give me, that's all. Don't I—oh! gemini."

"Hillo!—I beg pardon—I didn't know any one was hiding here have I hurt you?" inquired a youth, who, running down Great Suffolk Street at a smart pace, had turned into this doorway, and nearly jammed its occupant to death with the sudden concussion.

"You've done for my lights, young un," was the grave assertion.

"Your—your what?"

"My congreve lights—there's a kiver gone—I heered it scrunch. S'pose you'll pay like a—like a man?"

"I—I'm very sorry, but really I'm rather scarce of pocket-money just now—in fact, I've spent it all," stammered the lad. "You see, it was your fault, hiding here, and playing about here at this time of night, and I was in a hurry, being late."

"There isn't any one inside who'd stand a hapenny, is there?" whined the girl; "I'm the gal that's allus about here, you know—I've had nufin to eat to-day, and ain't no money for a night's lodging. I'm hard up—werry hard up, upon my soul. I don't remember being so druv since mother died o' the fever—never. And I'm not well—got a sore throat, which the fog touches up—awful."

"I'll—I'll ask my pa; but I don't think there is anything to give away."

The youth knocked at the door, and presently rushed by the servant who opened it, paying no heed to the remark of—

"Well, you are late, Master Sidney, I must say!"

The door closed again, and Master Sidney—a tall lad of fourteen, with long brown hair, brown eyes, and a white face—tore up the stairs two steps at a time, and dashed with but little ceremony into the dining-room, where the supper was laid by that time, and the juveniles were ranged round the table, large-eyed and hungry.

A shout from the boys assembled there—"Here's Sidney Hinchford;" a reproof from a stiff-backed, white-haired old gentleman in the corner—"Where *have* you been, boy?" a light-haired fairy in white muslin and blue sash darting towards him, crying, "Sidney, Sidney, I thought you were lost!"

"So I have been—lost in the fog—such a mull of it! I'll tell you presently when I've spoken to pa for a moment. And, oh! Harriet, here's—here's a little brooch I've bought, and with many happy returns of the day from a tiresome playfellow, and—and—*stolen, by Jingo!*"

The hand withdrew itself from the side pocket of his jacket, and was passed over the forehead, the lower jaw dropped, the brown eyes glared round the room, across at the opposite wall, and up at the gas branch—a two-burner of a bronze finger-post pattern,—and then Master Sidney doubled up suddenly and collapsed.

CHAPTER II.

MATTIE.

Mrs. Sarah Jane Watts, better known to society and society's guardians by the cognomen of Mother Watts, kept a lodging-house in Kent Street. They who know where Kent Street, Borough, is, and what Kent Street is like by night and day, can readily imagine that the establishment of Mrs. Watts was not a large one, or the prices likely to be high. Mrs. Watts's house, in fact, belonged not to Kent Street proper, but formed No. 2 of a cut-throat-looking court, crossing Kent Street at right angles. Here beds, or shares of beds, or shelves arranged horizontally under beds, were let out at twopence per head, or three-halfpence without the blankets, which were marked, "Stop Thief!"

Whether Mrs. Watts did badly with her business, or whether business prospered with her, it was difficult to determine by the landlady's external appearance, Mrs. W. being ever in rags, ever full of complaints and—drink. "Times" were always hard with her—the police were hard with her—her Kent Street contemporaries were hard with her—didn't treat her fair, undersold her, put more in a bed and charged less—"split upon her when things weren't on the square. Kent Street wasn't what it was when she was a gal!"

People constantly breathing the same atmosphere may notice a change in the "surroundings," but to common observers, or prying people paying occasional visits to this place, Kent Street seems ever the same—an eye-sore to public gaze, a satire on parish cleanliness and care, a disgrace to parish-authorities in general, and landlords and ground landlords in particular.

Ever to common eyes the same appearances in Kent Street. The bustle of a cheap trade in its shops; the knots of thieves and loose-livers at every narrow turning; the murmurs of unseen disputants, in the true London vernacular, welling from dark entries and up-stairs rooms; the shoals of children, hatless, shoeless, almost garmentless—all a medley of sights and sounds, increasing towards night-fall, when Kent Street is full of horror, and lives and purses are not safe there.

It is eleven in the evening of the same day in which our story opens, and Mrs. Sarah Jane Watts, baggy as regards costume, and unsteady as regards her legs, was standing in the doorway of her domicile, inspecting, by the light of the candle in her hand, a trinket of some kind, which had been proffered her by a smaller mortal, infinitely more ragged than herself.

"You got it honestly—I takes your word for it—you allers was a gal who spoke the truth, I will say that for you—it's a sham affair, and brassy as a knocker—say eightpence?"

"It's really gold, Mrs. Watts—it's worth a heap of money."

"It's the brassiest thing that ever I clapped eyes on—say eightpence and a bit of supper?"

"What sort o' supper?"

"Hot supper—tripe and inguns, as much as you can pad with."

"It's worth a sight more, if it's gold."

"I'll ask Simes—go upstairs and wait a minit'—Simes 'll tell us if it's gold, and praps stand more for it. I don't want the thing—I don't think it's safe to keep, myself; and if you've prigged it, Mattie, why, you'd better let it go."

"Very well."

Mattie—the girl whom we have watched in the dark entry of Mr. Wesden's door, wearied out with Mrs. Watts's loquacity, or over-powered by her arguments—went upstairs into a room on the first floor. A long, low-ceilinged room, containing three beds, and each bed containing four women and a few supplementary children, one

affected with a whooping-cough, that was evidently fast racking it to death. This was the feminine dormitory of Mrs. Watts—a place well known to London women in search of a night's rest, Southwark way—a place for the ballad singer who had twopence to spend, or a soul above the workhouse; for the beggar-women who had whined about the streets all day; for the tramps passing from Surrey to Essex, and taking London *en route*; for women of all callings, who were deplorably poor, idle, or vicious—it mattered not, so that they paid Mrs. Watts her claim upon them.

Mattie sat down by the fire, and began shivering with more violence than had characterized her in the cold and fog. The disturbed shadow, flung by the fire-light—the only light there—on the wall, shivered and danced grotesquely in the rear. No one took notice of the new-comer—although more than one woman lay awake in the background. A wrinkled hag, reposing with her basket of stay-laces under her head for security's sake, winked and blinked at her for a while, and then went off into a disjointed snore—the young mother with the sick child sat up in her share of the bed, and rocked the coughing infant backwards and forwards, till her neighbour, with an oath, swore at her for letting the cold in; then all was as Mattie had found it upon entering.

Presently, Mrs. Watts returned, candle in hand, smelling more aromatically of something hot and strong than ever.

"Simes says it is brass, and worth eightpence, and here's the money. Strike me dead, if he said more than eightpence, there!—strike him blind, if he'll get a farden out of it!"

"Where's the money?"

"Here's fippence—tuppence for to-night, and a penny you owe me, that makes eightpence; and as for supper, why, I'll keep my word—no one can ever say of Mother Watts that she didn't keep her word in anythink she undertooked."

"I—I don't care so much about supper as I did—ain't I just husky? No singing to-morrow, mother."

"Only singing small," was the rejoinder, with a grunt at her own wit; "you'd do better picking up brooches—you was allers clever with your fingers, mind you. I only wish I'd been 'arf as sharp when I was young."

"I—I only wish I hadn't—found the thing," commented the girl, sorrowfully.

"Well, I'm blest!"

Mrs. Watts was taking off the lid of her saucepan, and probing the contents with a fork.

"Fippence isn't a fortun, and the young chap gave me a hapenny once when I was singing in Suffolk Street—I didn't mean it, somehow—I said I never would again! Don't you remember when mother died here, how she went on just at the last as to what was to become o' me; and didn't I say I'd grow up good, and stick to

singing and begging, and all that *fun*—or go to the workus—or anythink?"

"Ah! your mother was a fine 'un to go on sometimes."

"And then I——"

"Now I don't want to hear anythink about your goings on—I don't know where you found that brassy brooch—I don't want to know—Simes don't want to know! We takes your word for it, that it was come by proper, and the less you say about it the better; and the sooner you turns into bed, if you don't want no supper, the better too."

"I don't see a good twopen'orth over there," commented Mattie; "they're as full as ever they can stick."

"Take the rug, gal, and have it all to yourself, here by the fire."

"Well, it's not so bad. I say—you know old Wesden?"

"What, in Suffolk Street?—well."

"He's got a party to-night—I've been a-listening to the music—they've been dancing and all manner. And laughing—my eye! they just have been a-laughing, Mother Watts—I've been laughing myself to hear 'em."

"Um," was the unsympathetic response.

"It's a buff-day—Wesden's gal's buff-day. You know Wesden's gal—proud of herself, rather, and holds her head up in fust-rate style, as well she may with such a shop as her father's got in Suffolk Street, and good and pretty as she is, Lor bless her! I s'pose old Wesden's worth pounds and pounds now?"

"Hundreds."

"Hundreds and hundreds of pounds," commented Mattie, coiling herself in the rug upon the floor; "ah! I s'pose so. I often thinks, do you know, I should like to be Wesden's little gal—what a lucky thing it 'd be to be turned somehow into Wesden's little gal, just at Christmas time, when fairies are about."

"What?"

"Real fairies, on course—not the gals with the legs in the pantermines. If there was any real fairies on course too, but I'm too knowing to b'lieve that. But if there was, I'd say, please turn me into Wesden's little gal, and give me the big doll by the parler door, and dress me like a lady in a blue meriner."

"Well, you are going on nicely about Wesden's gal. That was allus your fault, Mattie—such a gal to jaw, jaw, jaw—such a clapper, clapper, clapper about everythink and everybody."

"I was just a-thinking that I *was* going it rather, but I ain't a bit sleepy, and I thought you wouldn't mind me while you was having your supper, and my throat's so awful sore, and you ain't so sharp quite as you are sometimes. Do you know what I'd do if I was a boy?"

"How should I know?"

"Go to sea—get away from here, and grow up 'spectable. I

wouldn't stop in Kent Street—I hate Kent Street—I'd walk into the country—oh! ever so far—until I came to the sea, and then I'd find a ship, and turn sailor."

"Lookee here, you young drab," cried the stay-lace woman, suddenly opening her eyes, and shrieking out in a shrill falsetto, "I'll turn out and skin you, if you can't keep that tongue still. What am I here for?—what did I pay tuppence for?—isn't that cussed coughing baby enough row at a time?"

"If you've got anythink to say against my baby," said a husky voice, in the next bed, "say it out to his mother, and mind your cat's head while you say it, you disagreeable baggage!"

"Well, the likes of that!"

"And the likes of you, for that matter—don't give me any more of your sarse, or I'll——"

A tapping on the door with a stick diverted the general attention.

"Who's there?"

"Only me, Mrs. Watts."

"Oh! *only* you," was the response; "come in, will yer? I've no need to lock myself in, while I hide the swag away. *Now*, what's the matter?"

The door was opened, and enter a policeman, a man in private clothes, with a billycock hat and a walking-stick, accompanied by a pale-faced, long-haired youth, of fourteen years of age.

"Nothing particular the matter—only something lost, as usual, Mrs. Watts," said the man in private dress, politely. "Where's Mattie to-night?"

"There she is. She's been in all the evening, with a bad throat."

"Poor girl—throats *is* bad at this time of the year."

The speaker looked at the lad at his side, after giving the first turn backward to the rug.

"Is this the girl?"

The policeman took the candle from the table, and held the light close to the girl's face—white, pinched, and haggard, with black eyes full of horror.

"Don't say it's me, please," she gasped, in a low voice; "I'm the gal that sings in Suffolk Street on a Saturday night, and they gives wittles to at Wesden's. It isn't me."

Mattie had intended to brave it out at first, to have remained stolid, sullen, and defiant, after the manners of her class; but she felt ill and nervous, and the shadow of the prison-house loomed before her, and made her heart sink. Prison was a comfortable place in its way, but she had never taken to it—one turn at it had been enough for her. If it had been a policeman, or old Wesden, or anybody but this boy, three years her senior in age, many years her junior in knowledge of the world, she would have been phlegmatic to the last; but this boy had been kind to her twice in life—once on Christmas-eve, and once on a Saturday night before that, and she

gave way somewhat, partly from her new and unaccountable weakness, partly because it was not a very stern face that looked down into hers.

"That's her, sure enough—eh, young gentleman?" remarked the police officer in private clothes.

There was another pause—the girl's face blanched still more, and the look in her eyes became even more intense and eager; the boy glanced over his shoulder at the servants of the law.

"No—this isn't the girl. Oh! no."

"Are you quite certain? Stand up, Mattie."

Mattie turned out of her rug, and stood up, erect and motionless, with her hands to her side, and her sharp black eyes still on Master Hinchford.

"Oh! no policeman. Ever so much taller!"

"Then we're on the wrong scent it seems, and you'd better go home and leave it to us. Good night, Mrs. Watts."

"Good night," was the muttered response.

Policeman, detective, and Master Hinchford went down the stairs to the court, out of the court into Kent Street, black and noisome—a turgid current, that wore only a semblance of stillness at hours more late than that.

"We'll let you know in the morning if there's any clue," said the detective. "Jem," to the policeman, "see this lad out of Kent Street."

"All right. I think I'd try old Simes for the brooch."

"I'll drop on him presently. Good night, Jem."

"Good night."

The boy and policeman went to the end of Kent Street together, then the boy bade the policeman good night, ran across the road, recrossed in the fog a little lower down, and edged his way round St. George's Church into the old objectionable thoroughfare. A few minutes afterwards, he walked cautiously into the upstairs room of Mrs. Watts, startling that good lady at her late tripe supper very considerably.

"Hollo! young gemman, what's up now?"

Mattie, who had been crouching before the fire, shrank towards it more, with her hands spread out to the blaze. She looked over her shoulder at the door, anticipating his two unwelcome companions to follow in his wake.

"Look here, Mattie," said he, in a very cool and business-like manner, "fair's fair, you know. I've let you off in a handsome manner, but I'm not going to lose the brooch. If it had been a trumpery brooch, I shouldn't have cared so much."

"Was it real gold?"

"A real gold heart. I gave twelve and sixpence for it—I've been saving up for it ever since last April."

"I'll get it—I'll try and get it," said Mattie; "I haven't it myself

now—it's been passed on. Upon my soul, I'll try my hardest to get it back, see if I don't."

"We'll all try our werry hardest, Sir," remarked Mrs. Watts, blandly.

"Ah! I daresay you will," said the boy, dubiously; "p'raps it had been better if I'd told the truth—my pa always says 'Stick to the truth, Sidney;' but you did look such a poor body to lock up, that I told a lie for once. And who would have thought that you were a regular thief, Mattie!"

"I'm not a reg'lar—I don't like thieving—I've only thove when I've been werry—werry—hard druv: and I wasn't thinking of thieving, on'y of getting warm, when you came bump against me in the doorway. I meant to have knocked and asked for a scrap to eat after awhile, when they'd all got good-tempered over the beer and things. I'll bring the brooch—I'll get it back—leave it to me, Master Hinchford."

"How did you know my name?"

"Oh! I know everybody about here—everybody at your place, 'specially. Old Wesden and his gal in the blue meriner—and you, and your father with the red face and the white moustache and hair—and the servant, and the boy who takes the papers out, and is allus dropping them out of the oil-skin kiver, and everybody. I'll bring the brooch, because you let me off. Trust me," she repeated again.

"Well, I'll trust you. Fair play, mind."

"And now, cut out of this—it isn't quite a safe place for you; and the people can't sleep if you talk; and you may catch the whooping cough——"

"And you'll bring the brooch back? It's a bargain between us, Mattie."

"It's all right."

The youth re-echoed "all right," and went downstairs, watched from the dark landing by the girl who had robbed him. After a while the girl closed the door and followed slowly downstairs also. She was going in search of old Sumes.

CHAPTER III.

LODGERS.

"Depend upon it, Sidney, you'll never set eyes on that brooch again."

"I'm not so sure about that," was the half-confident reply.

"And depend upon it, you don't deserve to see it, boy—and that I for one shall be glad if it never turns up."

"Pa!—You really can't mean it."

"You told a lie about it, Sidney, and though you saved the girl from prison, yet it was a big, black lie all the same; and if luck follows it, why it's clean against the Bible."

"The girl looked so pitifully at me, you see—and I did think she might give the brooch back, out of gratitude."

"Gratitude in a young thief out of Kent Street?" laughed the father; "well, it's a lesson in life to you, boy, and, after all, it only cost twelve and sixpence."

"Ah!" sighed Sidney, "it was a long pull."

"You'll have learned by this that a lie never prospers—that in the long run it confronts you again when least expected, and to make your cheek burn with your own baseness. I wonder now," gravely surveying his son, "whether you would have let that girl off, if there had been no hope of the brooch coming to light."

The boy hesitated—then looked full at his sire.

"Well—I think I should."

"I think you told a lie for twelve and sixpence—the devil got a bargain from a Hinchford."

"You're rather hard upon me, pa," complained the boy, "and it wasn't for twelve and sixpence, because I never got the brooch back; and if I ever tell another lie, may I never see twelve and six pence of my own again. There!"

"Bravo, Sid!—that's a promise I'm glad to have wormed out of you, somehow. And yet—ye gods!—what a promise!"

"I'll keep it—see if I don't," said Master Sidney, with his lips compressed, and his cheeks a little flushed.

The father shook his head slowly.

"You are going into business—you will be a business man presently—a City man—one who will drive hard bargains, make hard bargains, and have to fight his way through a hundred thousand liars. In the pursuit of money—above all, in the scraping together of that fugitive article, you must lie or let a good chance go by to

turn an honest penny. I can't expect you *much* better than other men, Sid."

"I wonder whether uncle lied much before——"

"He lied as little as he could, I daresay," quickly interrupted the father, "but he became a rich man, and he rose from City trading. But I told you once before—I think I have told you more than once —that I never wish to hear that uncle's name."

"Yes, but I had forgotten it for the moment—speaking of money-making, and City men, threw me a little off my guard."

"Yes, yes, I saw that, my boy—drop the curtain over the old grievance, and shut the past away from you and me. I don't complain—I'm happy enough—a little contents me. In the future with a son to love and be proud of, I see the old man's happiest days!"

"We'll try our best, Sir, to make them so," exclaimed the boy.

"The Hinchfords are a buoyant race, and are not to be always kept down. I never heard of more than one of us a poor man in the same generation; the Hinchfords have intelligence, perseverance, and pluck, and they make their way in the world. If I have been unlucky in my time, and have dropped down to a lodging in Great Suffolk Street, I see the next on the list," laying his hand lightly on his boy's shoulder, "making his way to the higher ground, God willing."

"I haven't made much way yet," remarked the son, checking quietly the ambitious dreaming of the father. "I have only left school two months, and an office-boy in Hippen's firm is not a very great affair, after all."

"It's a step forward—don't grumble—you'll push your way—you're a Hinchford."

"I'll do my best—I never was afraid of work."

"No—rather too fond of it, I fear. Sometimes I think there is no occasion to pore, pore, pore over those books of an evening, studying a lot of dry works, which can never be of service to a City man."

"I should like to be *precious* clever!" was the boy's exclamation.

The father laughed, and added, with more satire than the boy detected—

"The precious clever ones seek out-of-the-way roads to fortune, and miss them—die in the workhouse, occasionally. It is only respectable mediocrity that jogs on to independence."

This strange dialogue between father and son occurred in the first floor of the little stationer's shop in Great Suffolk Street. Father and son had lodged there eight years at least; Mrs. Hinchford, a delicate woman, several years her husband's junior, had died there the place was home to the stiff-backed, white-haired man, who had

prophesied a rise in life for his son. Eight or nine years ago, the three Hinchfords had walked into Mr. Wesden's shop, and looked at the apartments that had been announced to be let from the front pane of the first-floor windows; had, after a little whispering together, decided on the rooms, and had never left them since, the wife excepted, who had died with her husband's hand in hers, praying for her boy's future. The Hinchfords had settled as firmly to those rooms on the first-floor, as Mr. Wesden, stationer, had settled to Great Suffolk Street in ages remote. The rent was low, the place was handy for Mr. Hinchford, who was clerk and book-keeper to a large builder, Southwark Bridge Road way; the attendance was not a matter of trouble to the Hinchfords, and the landlord and his wife were unobtrusive people, and preferred the lodgers' rent to their society.

For three years and a half the Hinchfords and Wesdens had only exchanged good mornings in their meetings on the stairs—the Wesdens were humble, taciturn folk, and the Hinchfords proud and stand-offish. After that period Mrs. Hinchford fell ill, and Mrs. Wesden became of service to her; helped, at last, to nurse her, and keep her company during the long hours of her husband's absence at business, even to take care of her noisy boy downstairs, when his boisterousness in the holidays made his presence—much as the mother loved him—unbearable. The Wesdens were kind to the Hinchfords, and Mr. Hinchford, a man to be touched by true sympathy, unbent at that time. He was a proud man, but a sensible one, and he never forgot a kindness proffered him. He had belonged to a higher estate once, and, dropping suddenly to a lower, he had brought his old notions with him, to render him wretched and uneasy. He had thought himself above those Wesdens—petty hucksters, as they were—until the time when Mrs. Wesden became a kind nurse to his wife, almost a mother to his boy; and then he felt his own inferiority to a something in them, or belonging to them, and was for ever after that intensely grateful.

When Mrs. Hinchford died, and the lonely man had got over his first grief, he sought Mr. Wesden's company more often, smoked a friendly pipe with him in the back parlour now and then—begged to do so, for refuge from that solitary drawing-room upstairs, filled with such sad memories as it was then. Hinchford and Wesden did not talk much, the latter was not fond of talking; and they were odd meetings enough, either in the parlour, or in the upstairs room, as business necessitated.

They exchanged a few words about the weather, and the latest news in the papers, and then subsided into their tobacco-smoke till it was time to say good night; but Wesden was company for Hinchford in his trouble, and when time rendered the trouble less acute, each had fallen into the habit of smoking a pipe together once or twice a week, and did not care to break it.

In the parlour meetings, Mrs. Wesden would bring her spare form and pinched countenance between them, and would sit darning socks, and saying little to relieve the monotony—unless the little girl were sitting up late, and her vivacity required attention or reprimand. They were quiet evenings with a vengeance, and Hinchford took his cue from the couple who managed business in Great Suffolk Street—and managed it well, for they minded their own, and were not disturbed by other people's.

Whilst we are looking back—taking a passing glimpse over our shoulder at the bygones—we may as well add, that the Wesdens were naturally quiet people, and did not put on company-manners for Mr. Hinchford in particular. Thirty years ago they had married and opened shop in Great Suffolk Street; struggled for a living without making a fuss about it; lived frugally, pinched themselves in many ways which the world never knew anything about; surmounted the first obstacles in their way, and then, in the same quiet manner, saved a little money, then a little more, and then, as if by habit, continued saving, maintaining the same appearance in themselves, and the same quaint stolidity towards their neighbours. They had even borne their family troubles quietly, losing three children out of four without any great demonstration of grief—keeping their lamentations for after-business hours, and their inflexible faces for their curious neighbours, to whom they seldom spoke, and from whom they chose no friends. They were a couple contented with themselves and their position in society,—a trifle too frugal, if not near—staid, jog-trot, business people of week days, church-goers who patronized free seats for economy's sake on Sundays.

Once a year the Wesdens launched out—celebrating, in the month of January, the natal day of the bright-faced girl in whom so much love was centred, for whom they were working steadily and persistently still. They had a juvenile party on that day always, and Harriet's school friends came in shoals to the feast, and Mr. Wesden presented his compliments to Mr. Hinchford, and begged the favour of borrowing the drawing-room for one night, and hoped also to have the honour of Mr. Hinchford's company, and Master Hinchford's company, on that occasion—all of which being responded to in the affirmative, affairs went off, as a rule, satisfactorily, until that momentous night in January, when Master Sidney Hinchford lost his brooch.

This incident altered many things, and led to many things undreamed of by the characters yet but in outline in these pages; without it we should not have sat down to tell the history of these people—bound up so inextricably with that poor wanderer of the streets whom we have heard called Mattie.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. HINCHFORD'S EXPERIMENT.

The middle of March; six weeks since the robbery of Master Hinchford's gold heart; a wet night in lieu of a foggy one; a cold wind sweeping down the street and dashing the rain all manner of ways; pattens and clogs clicking and shuffling about the pavement of Great Suffolk Street; the stationery shop open, and Mr. Wesden at seven o'clock sitting behind the counter waiting patiently for customers.

Being a wet night, and customers likely to be scarce in consequence, Mr. Wesden had carefully turned out one gas burner and lowered the two others in the window to imperceptible glimmers of a despondent character, and then taken his seat behind the counter ready for any amount of business that might turn up between seven and half-past nine p.m. The gas was burning more brightly in the back parlour, through the closed glass door of which Mrs. Wesden was cutting out shirts, and Miss Wesden learning, or feigning to learn, her school lessons for the morrow.

Mr. Wesden was devoting his mind purely to business; in his shop he never read a book, or looked at a newspaper, but waited for customers, always in one position, with his head slightly bent forwards, and his hands clutching his knees. In that position the largest order had not the power to stagger him—the smallest order could not take him off his guard. He bent his mind to business—he was "on duty" for the evening.

Mr. Wesden was a short, spare man, with a narrow chest, a wrinkled face, a sharp nose, and a sandy head of hair—a man whose clothes were shabby, and ill-fitted him, the latter not to be wondered at, Mrs. Wesden being the tailor, and making everything at home. This saved money, and satisfied Mr. Wesden, who cared not for appearances, had a soul above the fashion, and a faith in his wife's judgment. In the old days Mrs. Wesden was forced to turn tailor and trouser-maker, or see her husband without trousers at all; tailoring had become a habit since then, and agreed with her—it saved money still, and economy was ever a virtue with this frugal pair.

Mr. Wesden in his shop-suit then—that was his shabbiest suit, and exceedingly shabby it was—sat and waited for customers. He waited patiently; to those who strayed in for sheets of note-paper, books to read, shirt-buttons, tapes, or beads, he was very attentive,

settling the demands with promptitude and despatch, saying little save "a wet evening," and not to be led into a divergence about a hundred matters foreign to business, until the articles were paid for, and the money in his till. Then, if a few loquacious customers *would* gossip about the times, he condescended to listen, regarding them from his meaningless grey eyes, and responding in monosyllables, when occasion or politeness required some kind of answer. But he was always glad to see their faces turned towards the door— they wearied him very much, these people, and it was odd they could not take away the articles they had purchased and go home in quietness.

To people in the streets who, caught by some attraction in his window, stopped and looked thereat, he was watchful from behind his counter—speculating as to whether they were probable purchasers, or had felonious designs. He was a suspicious man to a certain extent as well as a careful one, and no one lingered at his window without becoming an object of interest from behind the tobacco-jars and penny numbers. On this evening a haggard white face—whether a girl's or woman's he could not make out for the mist on the window-panes—had appeared several times before the shop-window, and looked in, over the beads, and tapes, and through packets of paper, *at him*. Not interested at anything for sale, but keeping an eye on him, he felt assured.

He had a bill in the window—"A Boy Wanted"—and if it had been a boy's face flitting about in the rain there, he should not have been so full of doubts as to the object with which he was watched; but there was a battered bonnet on the head of the watcher, and therefore no room for speculation concerning sex, at least.

After an hour's fugitive dodging Mattie—for it was she—came at a slow rate into the shop. She walked forwards very feebly, and took a firm grip of the counter to steady herself.

Mr. Wesden critically surveyed her from his post of observation; she did not speak, but she kept her black eyes directed to the face in front of her.

"Well, what do you want, Mattie?" asked Mr. Wesden, finally.

"Nothin'—that is to buy."

"Ah! then we've nothing to give away for you any more."

"I want to speak to Master Hinchford," said Mattie; "I've come about the brooch."

"Not brought it back!" exclaimed Mr. Wesden, roused out of his apathetic demeanour by this assertion.

"I wish I had—no, I on'y want to see him."

Mr. Wesden called to his wife, and delivered Mattie's request through the glass, keeping one eye on the new comer all the while Mrs. Wesden sent her daughter upstairs with the message, and presently from a side door opening into the shop Miss Wesden made her appearance.

"If you please will you walk upstairs?"

Harriet Wesden spoke very kindly, and edged away from Mattie as she advanced—Mattie was the girl who had stolen the brooch, a strange creature from an uncivilized world, and the stationer's little daughter was afraid of her old pensioner.

The girl from the streets stared at Harriet Wesden in her turn, looked very intently at her warm dress and white pinafore, and then looked back at Mr. Wesden.

"May I go up, Sir?"

"I don't see why they can't come down here," he grumbled, "but you must go if they want to see you. Stop here, Harriet, and call Ann—you might catch something, girl."

Ann was called, and presently a broad-faced, red-armed girl made her appearance.

"Show a light to this girl upstairs, Ann."

"This girl—here?"

"Yes, that girl there."

"Oh! lawks—so *you've* turned up agin."

Mattie did not answer, she seemed very weak and ill, and not inclined to words foreign to her motive in appearing there. She followed the servant upstairs, pausing on the first landing to take breath.

"What's the matter with you—ain't you well?" asked the servant-maid.

"No, I ain't—I'm just the tother thing."

"Been ill?"

"Scarlet fever—that's all."

"Oh! lor a mussy on us!—keep further off! I can't bide fevers. We shall all be as red as lobsters in the morning."

"It ain't catching now—Mother Watts didn't catch it—I wish she had!"

"Will you go upstairs now?"

"Let's get a breath—I ain't so strong as I used to be—now then."

Up the next flight, to the door of the first-floor front, where Sidney Hinchford, pale with suspense, was standing.

"Have you got it?—have you got it, Mattie?"

"No—I ain't got nothin'."

"'Cept a fever, Master Sidney—tell your father to look out."

A thin large-veined hand protruded from the door, and dragged Master Hinchford suddenly backwards into the room; a tall, military-looking old gentleman, with white hair and white moustache, the instant afterwards occupied the place, and looked down sternly at the small intruder.

"Keep where you are—I didn't know you had a fever, girl. Ann Packet, put the light on the bracket. That will do."

Ann Packet set the chamber candlestick on a little bracket outside the drawing-room, drew her clothes tightly round her limbs, and

keeping close to the wall, scuttled past the girl, whom fever had sorely stricken lately. Mattie dropped on to the stairs, placed her elbows on her knees, took her chin between her claw-like hands, and stared up at Mr. Hinchford.

"I dont think you can catch anythin' from me, guv'nor."

Governor looked down at Mattie, and reddened a little.

"I'm not afraid of fever—it's only the boy I'm thinking about. Sidney," he called.

"Yes, pa."

"You can hear, if I leave the door open. Now girl," addressing the diminutive figure on the stairs, "if you haven't brought the brooch, what was the good of coming here?"

"To let you know I tried—that's all. I thought that all you might think that I'd stuck to it, you see. But I did try my hardest to get it back—because the young gent let me off when the bobbies would have walked me to quod. Lor bless you, Sir, I'm not a reg'lar!"

"A what?"

"A reg'lar thief, Sir. They've been trying hard to make me—Mother Watts and old Simes, and the rest—but it don't do. I was locked up once afore mother died, and mother was sorry—awful sorry for *her*—you should have just heard her go on when I came out again. Oh! no, I'm not a reg'lar—I sings about the streets for ha'pence, and goes to fairs, and begs—and so on, but I don't take things werry often. I'm a stray, Sir!"

"Ah!—God help you!" murmured the old gentleman.

"I never had no father—and mother's dead now. I'm 'bliged to shift for myself. And oh! I just was hard up when I tooked the brooch."

"And what became of it?"

"Old Simes stuck to it, Sir. I went to him on the werry night after I had seen Master Hinchford, and he said he'd sold it for tenpence, but he'd try and get it back for me, which he never did, Sir—never."

"No--I suppose not," was the dry response.

"And the next day I caught the fever, and got in the workus, somehow; and when I came back to Kent Street, last week that was, old Simes had seen nothin' more of the brooch, and Mother Watts had forgotten all about it—so she said!" was the disparaging comment.

"And you came hither to tell us all this?"

"Yes—I thought you'd like to know I *did* try, and that they were too deep for me. My eye! they just are deep, these two!"

"Why didn't you stay in the workhouse?"

"Can't bide the workus, Sir—they drop upon you too much. It's the wust place going, Sir, and no one takes to it."

"You're an odd girl."

Mr. Hinchford leaned his back against the door-post, and surveyed the ragged and forlorn girl on the lower stair. He was perplexed with this child, and her wistful eyes—keen and glittering as steel—made him feel uncomfortable. Here was a mystery—a something unaccountable, and he could not probe to its depths, or tell which was false and which was genuine in the character of this motherless girl before him. He had prided himself all his life in being a judge of character—a man of observation, who saw the flaw in the diamond—the real face behind the paint, varnish, and pasteboard. He had judged his own brother in times past—he had mixed much with the world, and gleaned much from hard experience thereof, and yet a child like this disturbed him. He fancied that he could read a struggle for something better and more pure in Mattie's life, and that Fate was against her and drawing her back to the shadows from which she, as if by a noble instinct, was endeavouring to emerge.

He felt curious concerning her.

"What do you intend to do now?"

"Lor, Sir, I don't know. It depends upon what turns up."

"You will not thieve any more?"

"Not if I can help it—but if I can't help it, Sir, I must go to school at Simes's. He teaches lots of gals to get a living!"

Mr. Hinchford shuddered. There was a pause, during which the head of Master Hinchford peered through the door to note how affairs were progressing. The father detected the movement, and when the head was hastily withdrawn, he drew the door still closer, and retained a grip of the handle for precaution's sake.

"You don't know what your next step will be? You'll try to live honestly, you say?"

"I'll try the ingun dodge. You gets through a heap of inguns at a ha'penny a lot, if the perlice will on'y let you be."

"And your stock in trade?"

"What's that?"

"How will you begin? Where are the onions to come from?"

"I shall sing for them to-morrow—my woice is comin' round a bit, Mother Watts says."

Mr. Hinchford pulled at his long white moustache—the girl's confidence and coolness induced him to linger there—something in his own heart led him to continue the conversation. He was a philosopher, a student of human nature, and this was a singular specimen before him.

"What could you live and keep honest upon?"

"Tuppence a day in summer—fourpence in winter. Summer a gal can sleep anywhere—there's some prime places in the Borough Market, and lots o' railway arches, Dockhead way; but it nips you awful hard when the frost's on."

"Well—here's sixpence to set up in business with, Mattie—and as

long as you can show me an honest front, and can come here every Saturday night and say, 'I've been honest all the week,' why, I'll stand the same amount."

Mattie's eyes sparkled at this rise in life.

"I'll borrow a basket, and buy some inguns to-morrow. P'raps *you* buy inguns sometimes, and old—Mr. Wesden downstairs, too. Yes, Sir, it's the connexion that budges one up!" she said, with the gravity of an old woman.

"I see. I'll speak to Mr. Wesden about his custom, Mattie. You can go now."

"Thankee, Sir."

She rose to her feet, went a few steps downstairs, paused and looked back.

"What is it, Mattie?"

"I hope the young gen'leman isn't a fretting much about his *brooch*."

"Here, young gentleman," called the father, "do you hear that?"

Master Hinchford laughed from within.

"Oh, no!—I don't fret."

"P'raps some day I shall have saved up enuf to pay him back That's a *rum* idea, isn't it, Sir?"

"Not a bad one, Mattie. Think it over."

"Yes, Sir."

Mattie departed, and Mr. Hinchford returned to the sitting-room. Master Hinchford, buried in books, was sitting at the centre table.

"Are you going at figures to-night?"

"Just for a little while, I think."

"You'll ruin your eyes—I've said so fifty times."

"Better have weak eyes than weak brains, Sir."

"Not the general idea, lad."

After a while, and when Master Hinchford was scratching away with his pen, the father said—

"You don't say anything about Mattie."

"I think it was very kind of you," said the youth; "and I think—somehow—that Mattie will be grateful."

"Pooh! pooh!" remarked the father, "you'll never make a first-rate City man, if you believe in gratitude. Look at the world sternly, boy. Put not your trust in anything turning out the real and genuine article—work everything by figures."

Master Hinchford looked at his sire, as though he scarcely understood him.

"I must bring you up to understand human nature, Sid—what a bad article it is—plated with a material that soon wears off, if rubbed smartly. Human nature is everywhere the same, and if you be only on your guard, you may take advantage of it, instead of letting it

take advantage of you. Now, this girl is a specimen, which at my own expense we will experimentalize upon. In that stray, my boy, you shall see the natural baseness of mankind—or girl-kind."

"Don't you think that she'll come again?"

"For the sixpence, to be sure! Every Saturday night, with a long story of how honest she has been all the week. Here we shall see a girl, who, by her own statement, and with a struggle, can keep honest now—note the effect of indiscriminate alms-giving."

"Of rewarding a girl for stealing my brooch, pa."

"Ah!—exactly. Some people who didn't understand me, would set me down for a weak-minded old fool. In studying human nature, one must act oddly with odd specimens. And this girl who came to tell us she had not brought the brooch back—I am just a little—curious—concerning!"

CHAPTER V.

SET UP IN BUSINESS.

I AM afraid that the reader will be very much disgusted with us as story-tellers, when we inform him that all these details are but preliminary to our story proper—a kind of prologue in six chapters to the comedy, melodrama or tragedy—which?—that the curtain will rise upon in our next book. Still they are details, without which, our characters, and their true positions on our stage, would not have been clearly defined; and in the uphill struggles of our stray, perhaps some student of human nature, like Mr. Hinchford, may take some little interest.

For they were real uphill struggles to better herself, and, therefore, worthy of notice. Remarking them, and knowing their genuineness, it has struck us that even from these crude materials a kind of heroine might be fashioned—not the heroine of a high-class book—that is a "book for the boudoir"—but of a book that will at least attempt to draw a certain phase of life as plainly as it passed the writer's eyes once.

Let us, ere we *begin* our story, then, speak of this Mattie a little more—this girl, who was not a "reg'lar"—who had never been brought up to "the profession"—who was merely a Stray! Let us

even watch her in her new vocation—set up in life with Mr. Hinchford's sixpence—and note by what strange accident it changed the tenor of *her* life; and at least set her above the angry dash of those waves which, day after day, engulph so many.

All that we know of Mattie, all that Mattie knew of herself, the reader is fully acquainted with. Mattie's mother, a beggar, a tramp, occasionally a thief, died in a low lodging-house, and, with some flash of the better instincts at the last, begged her child to keep good, *if she could.* And the girl, by nature impressionable, only by the force of circumstances callous and cunning, tried to subsist on the streets without filching her neighbours' goods—wavered in her best intentions, as well she might, when the world was extra vigorous with her—grew more worldly with the world's hardness, and stole now and then for bread, when there was no bread offered her; made friends with young thieves—"reg'lars"—of both sexes; constituted them her playmates, and rehearsed with them little dramas of successful peculation; fell into bad hands—receivers of stolen goods, and owners of dens where thieves nightly congregated; regarded the police as natural enemies, the streets as home, and those who filled them as men and women to be imposed upon, to be whined out of money by a beggar's plaint, amused out of it by a song in a shrill falsetto, tricked out of it by a quick hand in the depths of their pockets. Still Mattie never became a "reg'lar;" she earned money enough "to keep life in her"—she had become inured to the streets, and had a fear, a very uncommon one in girls of her age and mode of living, of the police-station and the magistrate. Possibly her voice saved her; she had sung duets with her mother before death had stepped between them, and she sold ballads on her own account when the world was all before her where to choose. She was a girl, too, whom a little contented; one who could live on a little, and make shift—terrible shift—when luck run against her; above all, her tempters, the Watts', Simes', and others, festering amongst the Kent Street courts, were cruel and hard with her, and she kept out of their way so long as it was possible.

Given the same monotony of existence for a few more years and Mattie would have become a tramp, perhaps, oscillating from fair to fair, race-course to race-course, losing true feeling, modesty, heart and soul, at every step. She had already tried the fairs, within ten miles—the races at Hampton and Epsom, &c., and had earned money at them—she was seeing her way to business next summer, at the time she was interested in one particular house in Great Suffolk Street, Borough.

Mattie was fond of pictures, and therefore partial to Mr. Wesden's shop, where the cheap periodicals and tinsel portraits of celebrated stage-ranters, in impossible positions, were displayed—fond, too, of watching Mr. Wesden's daughter in her perambu-

lations backwards and forwards to a day-school in Trinity Street, and critically surveying her bright dresses, her neat shoes and boots, her hats for week days, and drawn bonnets for Sundays, with a far-off longing, such as a destitute child entertains for one in a comfortable position—such a feeling as we envious children of a larger growth may experience when our big friends flaunt their wealth in our eyes, and talk of their hounds, their horses, and their princely estates.

"Oh! to be only Harriet Wesden," was Mattie's secret wish—to dress like her, look like her, be followed by a mother's anxious eyes down the street; to have a father to see her safely across the broad thoroughfare lying between Great Suffolk Street and school; to go to school, and be taught to read and write, and grow up good—what happiness, unattainable and intangible to dream of!

Eugene Sue, I think, tried to show the bright side of Envy, and the good it might effect; and I suppose there are many species of Envy, or else that we do not call things invariably by their right names. Mattie, at least, envied the stationer's daughter; Miss Wesden was a princess to her, and lived in fairy-land; and in seeing how happy she was, and what good spirits she had, Mattie's own life seemed dark enough; but that other life which Mattie tried to keep aloof from, denser and viler still. Harriet Wesden was the heroine of her story, and in a far-off distant way—never guessed at by its object—Harriet Wesden was loved, especially after she had begun to notice Mattie's attention to the pictures in the window, and to change them for her sole edification more often than was absolutely necessary.

Mattie was well known in Great Suffolk Street; they knew her at Wesden's—nearly every shopkeeper knew her, and exchanged a word or two with her occasionally—Great Suffolk Street was her *beat*. In health, Mattie was a good-tempered, sharp-witted girl—bearing the ills of her life with composure—selling lucifers and singing for a living.

They trusted her in Great Suffolk Street; the poor folk living at the back thereof bought lucifers of her of a Saturday night, and asked how she was getting on—the boys guarding their masters' shopboards nodded in a patronizing way at her—now and then, a plate of broken victuals was tendered her from some well-to-do shopkeeper, who could afford to part with it, and not miss it either—before her fever, she had had a little "c'nexion," and she set to work to get it up again, when the Hinchford sixpence heaped her basket with onions.

That was the turning point of Mattie's life; after that, a little woman with an eye to business; a small female costermonger, with a large basket before her suspended by a strap—troubled and kept moving on by policemen—but earning her fair modicum of profit;

quick with her eyes, ready with her answers, happy as a queen whose business was brisk, and lodging away from Mother Watts and old Simes, whose acquaintance she had quietly dropped.

Mattie still watched Harriet Wesden from a distance; still felt the same strange interest in that girl, one year her senior, growing up so pretty, whilst she became so plain and weather-beaten; experiencing still the same attraction for that house in particular; knowing each of its inmates by heart, and feeling, since the brooch defalcation, a part of the history attached to the establishment. When the Wesdens made up their minds to send Harriet to a boarding-school, by way of a finish to her education, Mattie learned the news, and was there to see the cab drive off; Mattie even told Ann Packet, servant to the Wesdens, and regular purchaser of Mattie's "green stuff," that she should miss her werry much, and Suffolk Street wouldn't be half Suffolk Street after she was gone—which observation being reported to Mrs. Wesden, directed more attention to the stray from that quarter, and made one more friend at least.

One more—for Mattie had found a friend in the tall, stiff-backed, stern-looking old gentleman of the name of Hinchford. The lodger's philosophy had all gone wrong; his knowledge of human nature had been at fault; his prophecies concerning Mattie's ingratitude had proved fallacious, and her steady application to business had greatly interested him. He was a sterling character, this old gentleman, for he confessed that he had been wrong; and he now held forth Mattie's industry as an example of perseverance in the world to his son, just as in the past he had intended her as a striking proof of the world's ingratitude.

The climax was reached two years after his dialogue with Mattie on the stairs—when Mattie was thirteen years of age, and Master Hinchford sixteen—when Mattie still hawked goods in Suffolk Street—quite a woman of the world, and deeply versed in market prices—one who had not even at that time attained to the dignity of shoes and stockings.

Mr. Wesden, the quiet man of business, was in his shop as usual, when Mattie walked in, basket and all.

Mr. Wesden regarded her gravely, and shook his head. Onions and some sweet herbs had been speculated in that morning, and no further articles were required at that establishment.

"If you please, I don't want you to buy, Mr. Wesden," said she, "but will you be good enough to send that up to Master Hinchford?"

Mr. Wesden looked at the small, dirty piece of paper in which something was wrapped, and then at Mattie.

"It's honestly come by, Sir," said Mattie.

"I never said it wasn't," he responded.

Mattie retired into the street—it was a Saturday night, and there

were many customers abroad—she was doing a flourishing trade, when a tall youth caught her by the arm, and dragged her round the corner of the first street.

"Oh! don't pinch my arm so, Master Hinchford."

"What's the twelve and sixpence for, Mattie?—not for the—not for the——"

"Yes, the *brooch!* I've been a-saving up, and keeping myself down for it, and now it's easy on my mind."

"I won't have it. I've been thinking about it, and I won't have it, Mattie."

"Please do. I've been trying so hard to wipe *that* off. I am quite well now. I've got the c'nexion all right, and shall save it all up again, and the winter's arf over, and when Miss Wesden comes back, you can buy her another brooch with it, and nobody disapinted."

The youth laughed, and coloured, and shook his head.

"I won't take twelve and sixpence from you, I tell you. Why, Mattie, you don't know the value of money, or you'd never fling it away like this. Why, it's a fortune to you."

"No—it's been a *weight*—that twelve and six, somehow. I have been a thief until to-night—now it's wiped clean. Don't try to make me a thief again by giving it on me back. Oh! don't, please, stop my trade like this!"

"Well, I shall make you out in time, Mattie—*perhaps*."

Master Hinchford pocketed the money, and walked away slowly. Mattie returned to her "c'nexion." Mr. Hinchford sat and philosophised to himself all the evening on the impracticability of arriving at a thorough understanding of human nature, as exemplified in "girl-kind."

CHAPTER VI.

THE END OF THE PROLOGUE.

HARD times set in after that night. The winter was half over, Mattie had said; but the worst half was yet to come, and for that she, with many thousands like her, had made but little preparation. The worst half of the frost of that year set in like a blight upon the London streets, froze the gutters, raised the price of coals, sent pro-

visions up to famine figures, cut off all the garden stuff, and threw such fugitive traders as Mattie completely out of work. Hers became a calling that required capital now; even the greengrocers' shops, Borough way, were scantily stocked—the market itself was not what it used to be when things were flourishing, and oh! the prices that were asked in those times!

Poverty of an ill aspect set in soon after the frost; crime set in soon after poverty—when the workhouses are besieged by hungry claimants for relief, the prisons are always extra full. Suffolk Street, the streets branching thitherwards to Southwark Bridge, the narrow lanes and turnings round the Queen's Bench, in the Borough Road, and verging towards Union Street, were all haunted by those phantoms that had set in with the frost—there was danger in the streets as well as famine, and money was hard to earn, and hold when earned! Small shopkeepers with large families closed their shutters and locked themselves in with desolation; men out of work grew desperate—the streets were empty of the basket women and costermongers, and swarming in lieu thereof with beggars and thieves even the police, nipped at the heart by the frost, were harder on society that stopped the way, and had little mercy even on old faces. Mattie's was an old face which stopped the way at that time—Mattie, basketless and onionless, and trying lucifers again, and essaying on Saturday nights—when workmen's wages were paid—a song or two opposite the public-houses.

In this old fashion, Mattie earned a few pence at times; she was small for her age—very small—and the anxious-looking face touched those who had odd coppers to spare. But it was a task to live notwithstanding, and Mattie fought hard with the rest of the waifs and strays who had a tough battle to wage that winter time. "Luck went dead against her," as she termed it; she was barred from the market by want of capital—one lot of goods that she had speculated in never went off her hands, or rather her basket, on which they withered more and more with the frost, until they became unsaleable products—and there was no demand for lucifers or anything!

Mattie was nearly starving when the old tempter turned up in Great Suffolk Street—at the time when she was weak, and the police had been more than commonly "down on her," and she had not taken a halfpenny that day—at a time when the tempter *does* turn up as a general rule, that is, when we are waiting very anxiously for an Excuse.

"What! Mattie!—Lor! the sight o' time since I set eyes on you!"

"What! Mrs. Watts!"

"What are you doing, girl?—not much for yourself, I should think," with a disparaging glance at the tattered habiliments of our heroine.

"Not much just now, Mrs. Watts—hard lines it is."

"Ah! well, it may be—you allus wanted pluck, Mattie, like your mother. And hard lines it is just now, for those who stand nice about trifles. What's that in your hand, gal?"

"Congreve lights."

"What! still at Congreve lights?—if I shouldn't hate the werry sight and smell on 'em by this time."

"So I do," said Mattie, sullenly.

"Come home with me, and let's have a bit o' talk together, Mattie—there's a friend or two o' your age a-coming to have a little talk with me to-night."

"Don't you keep a lodging house now?"

"No—a little shop for bones and bottles and such things; and we has a party in the back parler twice a week, and something nice and hot for supper."

"A school—on your own hook?" said Mattie, quickly.

"Oh! how sharp we gets as we grows up!—but you allus was as sharp as any needle, and I was only saying to Simes but yesterday, if I could just drop on little Mattie, she'd be the werry gal to do us credit—she would."

"I've been shifting for myself these last two years and odd, and I got on tidy till the frost set in, and now it's—*all up!*"

"Ah!—all up—precisely so."

Mrs. Watts did not detect the tragic element in Mattie's peroration; she had sallied forth in search of her, and had found her in the streets ragged and penniless and hungry. It was worth while to speculate in Mattie now—to show her some degree of kindness—to lure her back to the old haunts, and something worse than the old life. She began her temptations, and Mattie listened and trembled—the night was cold, and she had not tasted food that day. Mrs. Watts kept her hand upon the girl, and expatiated upon the advantages she had to offer now—even attempted to draw Mattie along with her.

"Wait a bit—don't be in a hurry," said Mattie; "I'll come presently p'raps—not just now."

"Oh! I'm not so sweet on you," said Mrs. Watts, aggrieved; "come if you like—stop away if you like—it's all one to me. I'll go about my rump-steaks for supper, and you can stay here and starve, if you prefer it."

This dialogue occurred only a short distance from Mr. Wesden's shop, when Mr. Wesden was putting up the shutters in his own quiet way, with very little noise, his boy having left him at a moment's notice. Mrs. Wesden, who had her fears for his back—Mr. W. had had a sensitive back for years—was dragging the shutters out from under the shop-board—thin slips of wood, that required not any degree of strength to manage. There were six shutters—at the third Mr. Wesden said—

"There's Mattie."

"Ah! poor girl!"

At the fifth he added—

"With an old woman that I don't like the style of very much."

Mrs. Wesden went to the door, and looked down the street at the tempter and the tempted—Mattie was under the lamp, and the face was a troubled one, on which the gas jet flickered. When the sixth shutter was up, and the iron band that secured them all firmly screwed into the doorpost, the quiet couple stood side by side and watched the conflict to its abrupt conclusion. Both guessed what the subject had been—there was something of the night-bird and the gaol-bird about Mrs. Watts, that was easy of detection.

Mrs. Wesden touched her husband's arm.

"Danger, John."

"Ah!"

"And that girl has been a-going on so quietly for years, and getting her own living, and she without a father and a mother to care for her—not like our Harriet."

"No."

"And the way she brought back the money for that brooch."

"Yes—that was funny."

"I don't see the fun of it, John."

"That was good of her."

"Do you know, I've been thinking, John, we might find room for her—those boys are a great trouble to us, and if we had a girl, it might answer better to take the papers out, and she might serve in the shop."

"Serve in MY shop—good Lord!"

"Some day when we could trust her, I mean—and she could sleep with Ann; and I daresay she would come for her keep in these times. And we might be saving her—God knows from what!"

"Mrs. Wesden, you're as full of fancies as ever you can stick."

"I've a fancy to help her in these hard times, John; and when helping her won't ruin us—us who have put by now a matter of three thou——"

"Hush!"

"And when helping her won't ruin us, but get rid of those plagues of boys, John. Fancy our Harriet in the streets like that!"

She pointed to Mattie standing alone there, still under the gas lamp, deep in thought. Mr. Wesden looked, but his lined face was expressive of little sympathy, his wife thought.

"We're hard pushed for a boy—the bill's no sooner down than up again—try a girl, John!"

"If you'll get in out of the cold, Mrs. W., I'll think of it."

Mrs. Wesden retired, and Mr. Wesden kept his place by the open door, and his quiet eyes on Mattie. He was a man who did nothing

in a hurry, and whose actions were ruled by grave deliberation. He did not confess to his wife that of late years he had been interested in Mattie; watched her from under his papers in the shop-window; saw her business-like habits, her method, her briskness over her scanty wares, her cleverness even in dodging her *bête noire* the policeman. He was a man, moreover, who went to church and read his Bible, and had many good thoughts beneath his occasional brusqueness and invariable immobility. A very quiet man, a man more than ordinarily cautious, hard to please, and still harder to rouse.

In shutting up his shop that night, he had caught one or two fragments of the dialogue, and he knew more certainly than his wife that Mattie was being tempted back to the old life. Of that life he knew everything; he had learned it piece by piece without affecting to take an interest in the matter; he even knew that Mattie had long taken a fancy—an odd fancy—to his daughter, that she often inquired about her, and her boarding-school, of Ann Packet, domestic to the house of Wesden.

He thought of Mattie's temptation, then of Mrs. Wesden's extraordinary suggestion. He was a lord of creation, and if he had a weakness it was in pooh-poohing the suggestions of his helpmate, although he adopted them in nine cases out of ten, disguising them, as he thought, by some little variation, and bringing them forward in due course as original productions of his own teeming brain.

And boys *had* worried him for years—lost his numbers, been behind-hand with the *Times* to his best customers, insulted those customers when reprimanded, and set the blame of delay at his door, played and fought with other boys before his very shop-front, broken his windows in putting up the shutters, had even paid visits to his till, and surreptitiously made off with stock, and had never in his memory of boys—industrious or otherwise—possessed one civil, clean-faced, decent youth.

"Suppose I had Mattie on trial for a week," he said at last, and looked towards the lamp-post. Mattie was gone—a black shadow, exactly like her, was hurrying away down the street towards the Borough—running almost, and with her hands to her head, as though a crowd of thoughts was stunning her!

Mr. Wesden never accounted for leaving his shop-door open without warning his wife—for running at his utmost speed after the girl.

At the corner of Great Suffolk Street he overtook her.

"Where are you going?—what are you running for?" he asked, indignantly.

Mattie started, looked at him, recognized him.

"Nothin'—partic'ler—is anythink the matter?"

"How—how—should you—like—to be—a *news boy?*" he panted.

No circumlocution in Mr. Wesden—straight to the point as an arrow.

"Yours!—you wouldn't trust me—you never gives trust."

"I've—I've thought of trying you."

"You?" she said again.

"Yes—*me*."

"Well, I'd do anythink to get an honest living—but I was giving up the thoughts o' it—it's so hard for the likes of us, master."

"Come back, and I'll tell you what I've been thinking about, Mattie."

Not a word about what Mrs. Wesden had been thinking about—such is man's selfishness and narrow-mindedness.

Mattie went back—for good!

On this prologue to our story we can afford to drop the curtain, leaving our figures in outline, and waiting a better time to paint our characters—such as they are—more fully. We need not dwell upon Mattie's trial, upon Mattie's change of costume, and initiation into an old frock and boots of the absent Harriet—of the many accidents of life at Wesden, stationer's, accidents which led to the wanderer's settling down, a member of the household, an item in that household expenditure. Let the time roll on a year or two, during which Mr. Wesden's back grew worse, and Mrs. Wesden's hair more grey, and let the changes that have happened to our friends speak for themselves in the story we have set ourselves to write.

Leave we, then, the Stray on the threshold of her new estate, standing in Harriet Wesden's dress, thinking of her future; the shadow-land from which she has emerged behind her, and the new scenes, new characters beyond there—beneath the bright sky, where all looks so radiant from the distance.

END OF THE FIRST BOOK.

BOOK II.

THE NEW ESTATE.

CHAPTER I.

HOME FOR GOOD.

THREE years make but little difference in the general aspect of a poor neighbourhood. The same shops doing their scanty business; the same loiterers at street corners; the same watch from hungry eyes upon the loaves and fishes behind the window glass; the same slip-shod men, women and children hustling one another on the pavement, in all weathers, "doing their bit of marketing;" the same dogs sniffing about the streets, and prowling round the butchers' shops.

An observer might detect many changes in the names over the shop fronts, certainly. Business goes wrong with a great many in three years—capital is small to work with in most instances, and when the rainy day comes, in due course, by the stern rule by which rainy days are governed, the resistance is feeble, and the weakest put the shutters up, sell off at an alarming sacrifice, and go with wives and children, still further on the down-hill road. There are seizures for rent, writs issued on delinquents, stern authority cutting off the gas and water, sterner authorities interfering with the weights and measures, which in poor neighbourhoods *will* get light occasionally; brokers' men making their quarterly raids, and still further perplexing those to whom life is a struggle, desperate and intense.

Amidst the changes in Great Suffolk Street, one business remains firm, and presents its wonted aspect. Over the little stationer's

shop, the old established emporium for everything in a small way, is still inscribed the name of Wesden—has been repainted the name of Wesden in white letters on a chocolate ground, as though there were nothing in the cares of business to daunt the tradesmen who began life there, young and blooming!

There are changes amongst the papers in the windows—the sensation pennyworths—the pious pennyworths—the pennyworths started for the amelioration and mental improvement of the working classes—unfortunate pennyworths, that never get on, and which the working classes turn their backs upon, hating a moral in every other line as naturally as we do. The stock of volumes in the library is on the increase; the window, counter, shelves and drawers, are all well-filled; Mr. Wesden deals in postage and receipt stamps—ever a good sign of capital to spare—and has turned the wash-house into a warehouse, where reams of paper, envelopes, and goods too numerous to mention, are biding their time to see daylight in Great Suffolk Street.

Changes are more apparent in the back-parlour, which has been home to Mr. and Mrs. Wesden for so many years. Let us look in upon them after three years' absence, and to the best of our ability note the alteration there.

Mr. and Mrs. Wesden are seated one on each side of the fire—Mrs. Wesden in a new arm-chair, bought of an upholsterer in the Borough, an easy and capacious chair, with spring seats and sides, and altogether a luxury for that establishment. Mrs. Wesden has become very feeble and rickety; rheumatic fever—that last year's hard trial, in which she was given over, and the quiet man collapsed into a nervous child for the nonce—has left its traces and robbed her of much energy and strength. She is a very old woman at sixty-three, grey-haired and sallow, with two eyes that look at you in an amiable, deer-like fashion—in a motherly way that gives you an idea of what a kind woman and good Christian she is.

Mr. Wesden, sitting opposite his worn better-half, was originally constructed from much tougher material. The lines are deeper in his face, the nose is larger, the eyes more sunken, perhaps the lips more thin, but there is business energy in him yet; no opportunity to earn money is let slip, and if it were not for constant twinges in his back, he would be as agile as in the old days when there were doubts of getting on in life.

But who is this sitting with them, like one of the family?—a dark-haired, pale-faced girl of sixteen, short of stature, neat of figure, certainly not pretty, decidedly not plain, with an everyday face, that might be passed fifty times, without attracting an observer; and then, on the fifty-first, startle him by its intense expression. A face older than its possessor's years; at times a grave face, more often, despite its pallor, a bright one—lit up with the cheerful thoughts which a mind at ease naturally gives to it.

Neatly if humbly dressed—working with a rapidity and regularity that would have done credit to a stitching machine—evidently at home there in that back parlour, to which her dark wistful eyes had been so often directed in the old days; this is the Mattie of our prologue—the stray, diverted from the dark course it was taking, by the hand of John Wesden.

"Wesden, what's the time now?"

"My dear, it's not five minutes since you asked last," is the mild reproof of the husband, as he tugs at his copper-gilt watch chain for a while; "it's close on ten o'clock."

"I hope nothing has happened to the train—"

"What should happen, Mrs. Wesden?" says a brisk, clear ringing voice; "just to-night of all nights, when Miss Harriet is expected. Why, she didn't give us hopes of seeing her till nine; and trains are always behind-hand, I've heard—and it's very early hours to get fidgety, isn't it, Sir?"

"Much too early."

"I haven't seen my dear girl for twelve months," half-moans the mother; "she'll come back quite a lady—she'll come back for good, Wesden, and be our pride and joy for ever. Never apart from us again."

"No, all to ourselves we shall have her after this. Well," with a strange half sigh, "we have done our duty by her, Mrs. W."

"I hope so."

"It's cost a heap of money—I don't regret a penny of it."

"Why should you, Wesden, when it's made our girl a lady—fit for any station in the world?"

"But this perhaps," says Mr. Wesden, thoughtfully; "and this can't matter now we——"

He does not finish the sentence, but takes his pipe down from the mantel-piece, and proceeds to fill it in a mechanical fashion. Mrs. Wesden looks at him quietly—her lord and husband never smokes before supper, without his mind is disturbed—the action reminds his wife that the supper hour is drawing near, and that nothing is prepared for Harriet's arrival.

"She will come home tired and hungry—oh! dear me—and nothing ready, perhaps."

"I'll help Ann directly," says Mattie.

The needle that has been plying all the time—that did not cease when Mattie attempted consolation—is stuck in the dress she is hemming; the work is rolled rapidly into a bundle; the light figure flits about the room, clears the table, darts down stairs into the kitchen; presently appears with Ann Packet, maid-of-all-work, lays the cloth, sets knives and forks and plates; varies proceedings by attending to customers in the shop—Mattie's task more often, now Mr. Wesden's back has lost its flexibility—flits back again to the task of preparing supper in the parlour.

With her work less upon her mind, Mattie launches into small

talk—her tongue rattles along with a rapidity only equal to her needle. She is in high spirits to-night, and talks more than usual, or else that loquacity for which a Mrs. Watts rebuked her once, has known no diminution with expanding years.

"We shall have her in a few more minutes, mistress," she says, addressing the feeble old woman in the chair; "just as if she had never been away from us—bless her pretty face!—and it was twelve days, rather than twelve months, since we all said good-bye to her. She left you on a sick bed, Mrs. Wesden, and she comes back to find you well and strong again—to find home just as it should be—everything going on well, and everybody—oh! so happy!"

"And to find you, Mattie—what?" asks Mr. Wesden, in his quiet way.

"To find me very happy, too—happy in having improved in my scholarship, such as it is, Sir—happy with you two friends, to whom I owe—oh! more than I ever can think about, or be grateful enough for," she adds with an impetuosity that leads her to rush at the quiet man and kiss him on the forehead.

"We're square, Mattie—we're perfectly square now," he replies, settling his silver-rimmed spectacles more securely on his nose.

"Oh! that is very likely," is the sharp response.

"You nursed the old lady like a daughter—you saved her somehow. If it hadn't been for you——"

"She would have been well weeks before, only I was such a restless girl, and wouldn't let her be quiet," laughs Mattie.

She passes into the shop again with the same elastic tread, serves out two ounces of tobacco, detects a bad shilling, and focuses the customer with her dark eyes, appears but little impressed by his apologies, and more interested in her change, locks the till, and is once more in the parlour, talking about Miss Harriet again.

"She is on her way now," she remarks; "at London Bridge by this time, and Master Hinchford—we must say Mr. Hinchford now, I suppose—helping her into the cab he's been kind enough to get for her."

"What's the time now, Wesden?" asks the mother.

"Well," after the usual efforts to disinter—or disembowel—the silver watch, "it's certainly just ten."

"And by the time Tom's put the shutters up, she'll be here!" cried Mattie; "see if my words don't come true, Mr. Wesden."

"Well, I hope they will; if they don't, I—I think I'll just put on my hat, and walk down to the station."

Presently somebody coming downstairs with a heavy, regular tread, pausing at the side door in the parlour, and giving two decisive raps with his knuckles on the panels.

"Come in."

Enter Mr. Hinchford, senior, with his white hair rubbed the wrong way, and his florid face looking somewhat anxious

"Haven't they come yet?"

"Not yet, Sir."

"Ah! I suppose not," catching Mattie's glance directed towards him across the needlework which she has resumed again, and at which she is working harder than ever; "there's boxes to find, and pack on the cab, and Miss Harriet's no woman if she do not remember at the last minute something left behind in the carriage."

"Won't you sit down, Sir?" asks Mrs. Wesden.

"N—no, thank you," he replies; "you'll have your girl home in a minute, and we musn't over-crowd the little parlour. I shall give up my old habit of smoking here, now the daughter comes back—you must step up into my quarters, Wesden, a little more often."

"Thank you."

"Temporary quarters, I suppose, we must say, now the boy's getting on so well. Thank God," with a burst of affection, "that I shall see that boy in a good position of life before I die."

"He's a clever lad."

"Clever, Sir!" ejaculates the father, "he's more than clever, though I don't sing his praises before his face. He has as clear a head-piece as any man at forty, and he's as good a man of business."

"And so steady," adds Mrs. Wesden.

"God bless you, madam; yes."

"And so saving," is the further addition of Mr. Wesden,—"that's a good sign."

"Ah! he knows the value of money better than his father did at his age," says the old man; "with his caution, energy, and cleverness we shall see him, if we live, a great man. Whoever lives to see him—a great man!"

"It's a comfort when our children grow up blessings to us," remarks Mrs. Wesden, dreamily looking at the fire; "neither you nor I, Sir, have any cause to be sorry for those we love so very, very much."

"No, certainly not. We're lucky people in our latter days—good night."

"You can't stop, then?" asked Wesden.

"Not just now. Don't keep the boy down here, please—he'll stand and talk, forgetting that he's in the way to-night, unless you give him a hint to the contrary. Out of business he's a trifle inconsiderate, unless you plainly tell him he's not wanted. Good night—I shall see Harriet in the morning."

"Yes—good night."

Mr. Hinchford retires again, and in a few minutes afterwards, before there is further time to dilate upon the danger of railway travelling, and the uncertainty of human hopes, the long-expected cab dashes up to the door. There is a bustle in Great Suffolk Street;

the cabman brings in the boxes amidst a little knot of loungers, who have evidently never seen a box before, or a cab, or a young lady emerge therefrom assisted by a tall young man, or listened to an animated dispute about a cab-fare, which comes in by way of sequence whilst the young lady is kissing everybody in turn in the parlour.

"My fare's eighteenpence, guv'nor."

"Not one shilling, legally," affirmed the young man.

"I never did it for a shilling afore—I ain't a going now—I'll take a summons out first."

"Take it."

"You won't stand another sixpence, guv'nor?"

"No."

"Then," bundling on to his box, and lashing his horse ferociously, "I won't waste my time on a tailor—it's much too valuable for that!"

The young man laughs at this withering sarcasm, and passes through the shop into the parlour, where the animation has scarcely found time to subside.

Harriet Wesden is holding Mattie at arm's length, and looking steadily at her—the stationer's daughter is taller by a head than the stray.

"And you, Mattie, have been improving, I see—learning all the lessons that I set you before I went away—becoming of help to father and mother, and thinking of poor *me* sometimes."

"Ah! very often of 'poor me.'"

"Oh! how tired I am!—how glad I shall be to find myself in my room! Now, Mr. Sidney, I'm going to bid you good night at once, thanking you for all past services."

"Very well, Miss Harriet."

"And, goodness me!—I did not notice those things before! What! spectacles, Sidney—at your age?"

The tall young man colours and laughs—keeping his position at the door-post all the while.

"Can't afford to have weak eyes yet, and so have sacrificed all my personal charms for the sake of convenience in matters of business. You don't mean to say that they look so very bad, though?"

"You look nearer ninety than nineteen," she replies. "Oh! I wouldn't take to spectacles for ever so much."

"That's a very different affair," remarks Sidney.

"Why?"

"Oh! because it *is*—that's all. Well, I think I'll say good night now—shall I take that box upstairs for you, Miss Harriet?"

"Ann and I can manage it, Mr. Hinchford," says Mattie.

"Yes, and put a rib out, or something. Can't allow the gentler sex to be black slaves during my sojourn in Great Suffolk Street. Good night all."

"Good night."

He closes the shop door, seizes the box which has been deposited in the shop, swings it round on his shoulder and marches upstairs with it two steps at a time, and whistling the while. On the landing, outside the sitting-room, and double-bedded room, which his father occupies, Ann Packet, domestic servant, meets him with a light.

"Lor a mussy on us!—is that you, Master Sidney?"

"Go a-head, upstairs, wench, and let us find a place to put the box down. This is Miss Harriet's box."

"Orful heavy, ain't it, Sir?"

"Well—it is not so light as it might be," asserts Master Sidney; "forward, there."

Meanwhile, too tired to repair to her room for any toilette arrangements at that hour of the night, Harriet Wesden sits down between her mother and father, holding her bonnet on her lap. Mr. and Mrs. Wesden regard her proudly, as well they may, Harriet being a girl to be proud of—tall, graceful and pretty, something that makes home bright to the parents, and has been long missed by them. No one is aware of all that they have sacrificed in their desire to make a lady of their only child—or of one-half of the hopes which they have built upon concerning her.

"This always seems such an odd, *little* box to come back to after the great Brighton school," she says, wearily; "oh, dear! how tired I am!"

"Get your supper, my dear, at once, and don't sit up for anybody to-night," suggests the mother.

"I don't want any supper. I—I think I'll go upstairs at once and keep all my little anecdotes of school and schooling till the morrow. Shall I?"

"By all means, Harriet, if you're tired," says the father, "but after a long journey I would take something. You don't feel poorly, my dear?"

"Who?—I—oh! no," she answered, startled at the suggestion; "but I have been eating biscuits and other messes all the journey up to London, and therefore my appetite is spoiled for the night. To-morrow I shall be myself again—and we will have a long talk about all that has happened since I left here last year—by to-morrow, we shall have settled down so comfortably!"

"I hope so."

She looks timidly towards her father, but he is smoking his pipe, and placidly surveying her. She kisses him, then her mother, lastly Mattie, and leaves the room;—the instant afterwards Mattie remembers the unwieldy box, which Master or Mr. Hinchford has carried upstairs.

"She'll never uncord the box—I should like to help her, if you can spare me."

"Knots always did try the dear girl," affirms Mrs. Wesden; 'go and help her by all means—my dear."

Mattie needs no second bidding; she darts from the room, and in a few minutes is at the top of the house; in her forgetfulness inside the room without so much as a "By your leave, Miss Wesden."

"Oh! dear, I forgot to knock—and oh! dear, dear!" rushing forward to Harriet sitting by the bedside and rocking herself to and fro, as though in pain, "what is the matter?—can I help you?—what has happened?"

CHAPTER II.

A GIRL'S ROMANCE.

Miss Wesden continued to rock herself to and fro and moan at frequent intervals, after Mattie had intruded so unceremoniously upon her sorrows. She had reached the hysterical stage, and there was no stopping the tears and the little windy sobs by which they were varied—and Harriet Wesden in tears, the girl whom Mattie had revereneed so long, was too much for our small heroine.

"Oh! dear—what has happened?—shall I run and tell your father and mother?"

"Oh! for goodness sake, don't think of anything of the kind!" cried the startled Harriet; "I—I—I shall be better in a minute. It's only a spasm or something—it's nothing that any one—can—help me—with!"

"I know what it is," remarked Mattie, after a moment's reflection.

"You—*you* do, Mattie?"

"It's the wind," was the matter-of-fact reply; "you've been eating a heap of nasty buns, and then come up here without your supper—and it's brought on spasms, as you say."

"How ridiculous you are, child!" said this woman of seventeen, parting her fair hair back from her face, and making an effort to subdue her agitation; "don't you see that I am very, very miserable?"

"In earnest?"

"Are people ever really, truly miserable in fun, Mattie?" was the sharp rejoinder.

"Not truly miserable, I should fancy. But you—oh! Miss Harriet, you miserable, at your age?"

"Yes—it's a fact."

"Perhaps you have been robbed," suggested the curious Mattie; "I know that they used to send them out from Kent Street to hang about the railway stations. Never mind, Miss Harriet, I have been earning money, lately; and if you don't want your father to know how careless you have been——"

"Always unselfish—always thinking of doing some absurd action, that shall benefit any one of the name of Wesden. No, no, Mattie, it's not money, it's not that—that vulgar complaint you mentioned just now. Oh! to have one friend in the world in whom I could trust—in whom I could confide my misery."

"And haven't you *one?*" was the soft answer.

Harriet looked up at the wistful face—so full of love and pity.

"Ah! there's *you*—you mean. But you are a child still, and would never understand me. *You* would never have sympathy with all that I have suffered, or keep my secret if you had."

"What I could understand, I cannot say—I'm still hard at work, in overtime, at my lessons; but you may be sure of my sympathy and of my silence. It's not that I'm so curious, Miss Harriet, but that I hope, when I know all, to be a comfort to you."

Harriet shook her head despondently, and beat her tiny foot impatiently upon the carpet. Any one in the world to be a comfort to her was a foolish idea, that only irritated her to allude to.

"I'm living here to be a comfort to you all," said Mattie, in a low voice; "I've set myself to be that, if ever I can. Every one in this house helped in a way to take me from the streets; every one has been more kind to me than I deserved—helped me on, given me good advice—done so much for me! I—I have often thought that perhaps my time might come some day to your family, or the Hinchford's; but if to you, my darling, whom I love before the whole of them—who has been more than kind—whom I loved when I was a little ragged girl in the dark streets outside—how happy I shall be!"

"Happy to see me miserable, Mattie; that's what *that* amounts to."

"I didn't mean that," answered Mattie, half aggrieved.

"No, I'm sure you did not," was the reply. "Lock the door, my dear, and let me take you into my confidence—I *do* want some one to talk to about it terribly!"

Mattie locked the door, and, full of wonder, sat down by Harriet Wesden's side. The stationer's daughter had always treated Mattie as a companion rather than as a servant; she had but seen her in her holidays of late years—her father had trusted Mattie, and made a

shopwoman of her—she had found Mattie constituted after a while one of the family—Mattie was only a year her junior, and Mattie's love, almost her idolatry for her, had won upon a nature which, though far from faultless, was at least susceptible to kindness, ever touched by affection, and ever ready to return both.

"You must know, Mattie, then—and pray never breathe a syllable of this to mortal soul again—that I'm in love."

"*Lor!*" gasped Mattie.

"Dreadfully and desperately in love."

"Oh! hasn't it come early; and oh! *ain't* I dreadfully sorry."

"Hush, Mattie; not so loud. They'll be coming up to bed in the next room presently, and if they were to find it out I should die."

"They wouldn't mind, after they had once got used to it," said Mattie; "and if it has really come to love in earnest—there's a good deal of sham love I've been told—why, I don't think there's anything to cry about. I should dance for joy myself."

"You're too young to know what you're talking about, Mattie," reproved Harriet.

"No, I'm not," was the quick answer; "I should feel very happy to know that there was some one to love me better than anybody in the world—to think of me first, pray about me before he went to bed at night, dream of me till the daytime, keep me always in his head. Why, shouldn't I be happy to know this, I who never remember what love was from anybody?"

"Yes, yes, I understand you, Mattie," said Harriet; "that's part of love—not all."

"What else is there?"

Mattie was evidently extremely curious concerning all phases of "the heart complaint."

"It's too complicated, Mattie; when you're a woman you'll be able to find out for yourself. It's better not to trouble your head about it yet awhile."

"I wish you hadn't, Miss Harriet. It's not the likes of me that is going to think about it; and if you had left it till you were really a woman—I don't know much about the matter yet—but I'm thinking it would be all the better for you, too, my dear."

"It came all of a rush like; I wasn't thinking of it. There were two young men at first, who used to watch our school, and laugh at the biggest of us, and kiss their hands—just as young men *will* do, Mattie."

"Like their impudence, I think."

Mattie's matter-of-fact views were coming uppermost again. She had seen much of the world in her youth, experienced much hardship, worked hard for a living, and there was no romance in her disposition, only affection, which had developed of late years, thanks to her new training.

"But there's always a little fun amongst the big girls, Mattie."

"What is the governess about?"

"She's looking out; but, bless you, she may look!"

"Ah! I suppose so. Well?"

"And then one young man went away, and only one was left—the handsomer of the two—and he fell in love *with me!*"

"Really and truly?"

"Why, of course he did. Is it so wonderful?" and the boarding-school girl looked steadily at her companion.

Mattie looked at her. She *was* a beautiful girl, and perhaps it was not so wonderful, after all. But then Mattie still looked at Harriet Wesden as a child—even as a child younger than she whom the world had aged very early—rendered "old-fashioned," as the phrase runs, in many things.

"Not wonderful, perhaps; but wasn't it wrong?" asked Mattie.

"I don't think so—I never thought of that—he was very fond of me, and used to send me letters by the servant, and I—I did get very fond of him. He was a gentleman's son, and oh! *so* handsome, Mattie, and *so* tall, and *so* clever!"

"About your age, I suppose?"

"No, four-and-twenty, or more, perhaps. I don't know."

"Well?—oh! dear, how *did* it end?" asked Mattie; "it's like the story-books in the shop, is'nt it?"

"Wait awhile, dear. The misery of the human heart is to be unfolded now. He's a gentleman's son, and there's an estate or something in West India, or East India, or in some dreadful hot place over the water somewhere, where the natives hook themselves in the small of their backs, and swing about and say their prayers."

"How nasty!"

"And—and he—was to go there," her sobs beginning again at the reminiscence, "and live there, and," dropping her voice to a whisper, "he asked me if I'd run away with him, and be married to him over there."

Mattie clenched her fist spasmodically. She saw through the flimsy veil of romance, with a suddenness for which she was unprepared herself. She was a woman of the world, with a knowledge of the evil in it, on the instant.

"Oh! that man was a big scamp, I'm sure of it—I know it!"

"What makes you think that?" asked Harriet, imperiously.

"Couldn't he have come to Suffolk Street, and told your father all about it like a—like a man?"

"Yes, but *his* father—his father is a gentleman, and would never let him marry a poor, deplorable stationer's daughter."

"Ah! his father does not know you, and his father didn't have the chance of trying, I'm inclined to think," was the shrewd comment here.

"Never mind that," said Harriet, "I don't see that that's anything to do with the matter just now. I wouldn't run away; I was very frightened; I loved father and mother, and I knew how they loved me. And when I cried, he said he had only done it to try me, and then—and then—he went away next day for ever!"

"And a good riddance," muttered Mattie.

"Oh! Mattie, you cruel, *cruel* girl! is this the sympathy you talked about a little while ago?"

"I've every sympathy with you, my own dear young lady," said Mattie; "I'm sorry to see how this is troubling you—you so young!—just now. But I don't think *he* acted very properly, Miss Harriet, or that you were quite so careful of yourself as—as you might have been."

"I'm a wretched, wretched woman!"

"Does he know where you live?"

"Ye—es," she sobbed.

"And where did he live before he went to India?"

"Surrey."

"That's a large place, I think. I haven't turned to geography lately, but I fancy it's a double map. If that's all the address, it's a good big one. May I ask his name?"

"Never," was the melo-dramatic answer.

"Ah! it does not matter much. I hope, for the sake of all downstairs, you will try and forget it. It's no credit; you were much too young, and he too old in everything. Oh! Miss Harriet, you and the other young ladies must have been going it down at Brighton!"

"It all happened suddenly, Mattie; I'm not a forward girl; they're all of my age—oh! and ever so much bolder."

"A very nice school that must be, I should think," said Mattie, leaving the bed for the box, which she proceeded to uncord; "if I ever hear of anybody wanting to send their daughters to a finishing akkademy," Mattie was not thoroughly up in pure English yet, "I'll just recommend that one!"

"Mattie," reproved Harriet, "you've got at all that you wanted to know, and now you're full of bitter sarcasm."

"I'm full of bitter nothing, Miss," was the reply; "and oh!—you don't know how sorry I feel that it has all happened, making you so old and womanly before your time—filling your head with rubbish about—the chaps!"

Harriet said nothing—she sat and watched with dreamy eyes the process of uncording; only, when Mattie attempted to turn the box on its side, did she spring up and help to assist without a word.

"There, that'll do," she said peevishly; "let me only unlock the box, and get at my night-things, that's all I want. Mattie, for goodness sake, don't keep so in the way!"

Mattie stood aside, and Harriet Wesden, with an impatient hand, unlocked the box, and raised the heavy oaken lid. Mattie's eyes, sharp as needles, detected a small roll of written papers, neatly tied.

"Are these the letters, Miss Harriet?"

"Good gracious me, how curious and prying you are!" said Harriet, snatching the packet from her hand. "I wish I had never told you a syllable—I wish you'd leave my things alone!"

"I beg your pardon—I only asked. It *was* wrong."

"Well, there, I forgive you; but you are so tiresome, and old-fashioned. I can't make you out—I never shall—you're not like other girls."

"Was I brought up like other girls, you know?" was the sad question.

"No, no—I forgot that—I beg your pardon, Mattie; I didn't mean it for a taunt."

"God bless you, I know that. What are you doing?"

"Getting rid of these," thrusting the letters in the candle flame as she spoke. "I can trust you, but not them, Mattie."

"I'd hold them over the fire-place, then. If they drop on the toilet-table, we shall have the house a-fire."

Harriet took the advice proffered, and removed her combustibles to the place recommended. Mattie, on her knees by the box, watched the process.

"And there's an end of *them*," Harriet said at last, in a decisive tone.

"And of him—say of him?"

"We parted for ever—but I shall always think of him—think, too, that perhaps I *was* very young and thoughtless and vain, to lead him on, or to be led on. But oh! Mattie, he did love me—he wouldn't have harmed me for the world!"

"He hasn't spoken of writing—you haven't promised to write any more."

"No—it was a parting for *ever*. Haven't I said so, over and over again?"

"Then you'll soon forget him, Miss Harriet—try and forget him, for your own sake—you can't tell whether he wasn't making game of you, for certain; he didn't act well, for he wasn't a boy, was he? And now go to sleep, and wake up in the morning your old self, Miss."

"I'll try—I must try!"

"I don't think that this fine gentleman will ever turn up again; if he does, you'll be older to take your own part. Oh! dear, how contrary things do go, to be sure."

"What's the matter now?"

"I did think I knew whom you were to marry."

"Who was it?" said Harriet, with evident interest in her question.

"Well, I thought, Miss Harriet, that you'd grow up, and grow up to be a young woman, and that Master Sidney underneath would grow up, and grow up to be a young man, and you'd fall naturally in love with one another—marry, and be oh! so happy. When I'm hard at work at the lessons he or his father writes out for me sometimes, I catch myself forgetting all about them, and thinking of you and him together—and I your servant, perhaps, or little housekeeper. I've always thought that that would come to pass some day, and that he'd grow rich, and make a lady of you—and it made me happy to think that the two, who'd been perhaps the kindest in all the world to me, would marry some fine day. I've pictered it—pictured it," she corrected, "many and many a time, until I fancied at last it must come true."

"Master Sidney, indeed!" was the disparaging comment.

"When you know him, you won't talk like that," said Mattie; "he's a gentleman—growing like one fast—and I don't think, young as he is, that he would have acted like that other one you've been silly enough to think about."

"Silly!—oh! Mattie, Mattie, that isn't sympathy with me—I don't know whether you're a child, or an old woman—you talk like both of them, and in one breath. Why did I tell you!—why did I tell you!"

"Because I was in earnest, and begged hard—because I was afraid, and you could not keep such a secret from me as that; and if you had wanted help—how I would have stood by you!"

Harriet noted the kindling eyes, and her heart warmed to the nondescript.

"Thank you, Mattie—one friend at least now."

"Always,—don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do."

Mattie was at the door, when Harriet called her back.

"Mattie, never a word about this again. I daresay I shall soon forget it, for I am very young; and though it was LOVE, yet I won't let it break my heart. I'm very wretched now. I shall be glad," she added with a yawn, "to lie down and think of all my sorrows."

"And sleep them away."

"Oh! I shall not close an eye to-night. Good night, Mattie."

Miss Harriet Wesden, a young lady who had begun life early, was sleeping soundly three minutes after Mattie's departure from the room.

CHAPTER III.

OUR CHARACTERS.

In our last chapter we have implied that life began early for Harriet Wesden. Before her school-days were finished, and with that precocity for which school-girls of the present era are unhappily distinguished, she was thinking of her lover, and constituting herself the heroine of a little romance, all the more dangerous for being unreal and out of the common track. A tender-hearted girl, with a head not the most strong in the world, is easily impressed by the sentiment, real or assumed, of the first good-looking young fellow whom she may meet. In her own opinion she is not too young to receive admiration, and the consciousness of having impressed one of the opposite sex arouses her vanity, changes the current of her thoughts, makes the world for awhile a very different place—bright, ethereal and unreal. All this very dangerous ground to tread, but the more delightful for its pitfalls; all this a something that has occurred in a greater or less degree to most of us in our time, though we have the good sense to say nothing about it, or to laugh at the follies and the troubles we rashly sought in our nonage. Boys and girls begin their courtships early in these latter days—there is not a girl of sixteen who does not consider herself fit to love and be loved, however demure she may appear, or however much she may be kept back by detestable short frocks and frilled indescribables. And as for our boys, why, they are men of the world immediately they leave school—men of a world that is growing more rapid in its revolutions, and hardens its inhabitants wonderfully fast. It is a singular fact in the history of shop-keeping, that children's toys are becoming unfashionable. "Bless you, Sir, children don't buy toys now, they're much too old for those amusements!" was the assertion of one of the trade to the writer of this work. And how many little misses and masters can most of us call to mind who are growing pale over their fancy work, their books, and their "collections," children who will do anything but play, and have souls above "Noah's Arks."

Therefore, in these precocious times, Harriet Wesden, seventeen next month, was no exceptional creature; moreover, she had been to a boarding-school, where she had met with many of her own age who were twice as womanly and worldly—big girls, who were

always talking about "the chaps," as Mattie had inelegantly phrased it.

There is no occasion in this place to retrace the school-career of Harriet Wesden, to see how much she has kept back or extenuated; her story to Mattie was a truthful one, told with no drawbacks, but with a half-pride in her achievements which her girlish sorrows were not capable of concealing. There was something satisfactory in having loved and having been loved; and though the love had vanished away, still the reminiscence was not wholly painful, however much she might fancy so at that period.

Mattie had listened to her story, and offered all the consolation in her power; Mattie was a girl of hard, plain facts, and looked more soberly at the world than her contemporaries. She had a dark knowledge of the worst part of it, and her early years had aged her more than she was aware of herself—aged her thoughts rather than her heart, for she was always cheerful, and her spirits were never depressed; she went her way in life quietly and earnestly, grateful for the great change by which that life had been characterized; grateful to all who had helped to turn it in a different channel. At this period, Mattie was happy; there was nothing to trouble her; it was an important post to hold in that stationer's shop; everybody had confidence in her, and had given her kind words; she had learned to know right from wrong; they were interested in her moral progress, both the shopkeeper and the lodgers on the first floor; she was more than content with her position in society—she was thankful for it.

The Hinchfords had maintained their interest in Mattie, from the day of her attempt to explain her long search for the brooch. The father, a student of human nature, as he termed himself, had persuaded her to attend evening school, to study to improve in reading and writing at home; and Master Hinchford, who wrote a capital hand, set her copies in his leisure, and gave his verdict on her caligraphic performances. Mattie snatched at the elements of her education in a fugitive manner; Mr. Wesden did not object to her progress, but she was his servant, afterwards his shopwoman, and he wanted his money's worth out of her, like a man who understood business in all its branches. Mattie never neglected work for her studies, and yet made rapid advancement; and, by-and-bye, Mr. Hinchford, during one of his quiet interviews with the stationer, had obtained for her more time to attend her evening classes—and hence the improvement which we have seen in Mattie. So time had gone on, till Miss Wesden's return for good—so far, then, had the stationer's daughter and the stray made progress.

Mattie, with a judgment beyond her years, had perceived the evanescent nature of Harriet Wesden's romance, and prophesied concerning it. She did not believe in the depth or intensity of Harriet's sorrow; moreover, she knew Harriet was not of a fretful

disposition, and that new faces and new pursuits would exercise their usual effect upon a nature impressionable, and—just a little weak! Mattie was a judge of character without being aware of it, and her own unimpressionability set her above her fellows, and gave her a clear insight into events that were passing around her. A girl of observation also, who let few things—serious or trivial—escape her, but glanced at them in their revolutions, and remembered them, if necessary. This acuteness had possibly been derived from her hand-to-mouth existence in the old days; in her time of affluence, the habit of storing up and taking mental notes everything, had not deserted her. Take her altogether, she was a sharp girl, and suited Mr. Wesden's business admirably.

Quietly Mattie set herself to take stock of Harriet Wesden, after the latter's confession, to note if the love to which she had confessed were likely to be a permanency or not. Harriet and Mattie spoke but little concerning the adventures at Brighton; Mattie shunned the subject, and turned the conversation when Harriet felt prone to dilate upon her melancholy sensations. Besides, Mattie knew her place, kept to the shop, whither Harriet seldom followed her—that young lady having a soul above the business, by which she had benefited. Mr. and Mrs. Wesden rather admired this; they had saved money, and the business, to the latter at least, was but a secondary consideration; they had paid a large sum to make a lady of Harriet, and when they retired from business, Harriet would go with them, and be their hope and comfort, with her lady-like ways, in their little suburban residence. They were not slow in letting Harriet know this; they spoke of a private life very frequently; when Harriet was two years older, they would retire and live happily ever afterwards! Or, Mr. Wesden thought more prudently, if they did not give up the business for good, still they would live away from it, and leave the management of it to some trustworthy personage—Mattie, for instance, who would see after their interests, whilst they took their ease in their old age.

Mr. Hinchford, senior, had listened to these flying remarks more than once; he spoke of his own establishment in the future in *his* turn—where and how he should live with that clever boy of his, who would redeem the family credit by assuming the Hinchfords' legitimate position.

"I kept my carriage once, Mr. Wesden—I hope to do it again. My boy's very clever, very energetic—he has gained the esteem of his employers, and I believe that they will make a partner of him some day."

What Sidney Hinchford believed did not appear upon the surface. He was a youth—say a young man—who kept a great many thoughts to himself, who pushed on in life steadily and undemonstratively. His father was right; Sidney had gained the esteem of his employers; he *was* very clever at figures, handy as a correspondent,

never objected to over-work, did more work than any one of the old hands, evinced an aptitude for business and an interest in his employers' success—very remarkable in these egotistical times. His employers were wholesale tea-dealers in Mincing Lane—well-to-do men, without families of their own—men who had risen from the ranks, after the fashion of City men, who have a nice habit of getting on in the world. Sidney Hinchford's manner pleased them, but they kept their own counsel, and watched his progress—and Sidney's was a remarkable progress for a youth of his age.

Sidney, be it said here, was an ambitious youth in his heart. His father had been a rich man; his father's family, from which they held themselves aloof, were rich people, and his hope was in recovering the ground which, by some means or other never satisfactorily explained to him, the Suffolk Street lodgers had managed to lose. Young men brought up in City counting-houses have a wonderful reverence for money; Sidney saw its value early in life, and became just a trifle too careful; for over-carefulness makes a man suspicious, and keeps the heart from properly expanding with love and charity to those who need it. An earnest and honourable young man, as we hope to prove without labelling our character at the outset, yet he stood too much upon what was legal, what was a fair price, or a good bargain, and pushed his way onwards without much thought for the condition of beings less lucky than he. There was a prize ahead of him; he could see it above the crowd that jostled him for bread, for fame, for other prizes worth the winning, and by which he set no store, and he kept his eyes upon it steadfastly and dreamed of it in his sleep. He became grave-faced and stern before his time—he was a man at nineteen, with a man's thoughts, and doing a man's work.

And then a something came to soften him and turn his thoughts a little aside from the beaten track, and this is how it came about.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW ADMIRER.

Master Sidney Hinchford in old times had been a playfellow of Harriet Wesden—lodging in the same house together, returning from school at the same hours, they had become almost brother and sister, entertaining for each other that child's affection, which it was but natural to expect would have been developed under the circumstances.

Mr. Hinchford, a widower, with no great ability in the management of children, was glad to see his boy find an attraction in the stationer's parlour, and leave him to the study of his books or the perusal of his newspapers, after the long office hours. He was a thoughtful man, too, who considered it best for his son to form a friendship with one of his own age; and he had become attached to the Wesdens, as people who had been kind to him and his boy in a great trouble. And it was satisfactory to pair off Harriet Wesden—who was in the way of business, and generally considered at that period a tiresome child, seldom of one mind longer than five minutes together—with Master Hinchford, and so keep her out of mischief and out of the shop where the draughts were many and likely to affect her health. This good understanding had never diminished between Harriet Wesden and Sidney Hinchford; only the boarding-school at last had set them apart. When they met once a year, they were still the same warm friends, and it was like a brother meeting a sister when the Christmas holidays came round. The last holiday but one, when Harriet, who had grown rapidly, returned from Brighton, a girl close upon sixteen years of age, there was a little shyness at first between them, which wore off in a few days. Sidney met her after a year's absence without kissing her, stared and stammered, and found it hard to assume a natural demeanour, and it was only Harriet's frank and girlish ways that eventually set him at his ease.

The present Christmas all was altered, very much for the worse, Sidney thought. He had met, for the first time, a pale-faced, languishing young lady—a lady who had become very beautiful certainly, but was not the Harriet Wesden whom he had hitherto known. He had escorted her from the Brighton station, thinking that she had altered very much, and that he did not like her new

ways half so well as the old; he had seen her every evening after that return, noted the variableness of her moods, set her down, in his critical way, for an eccentric girl, whom it was impossible to understand.

If she were dull, he fancied he had offended her; if she were lively, he became thin-skinned enough to imagine that she was making fun of him. He did not like it, he thought; but he found the new Harriet intruding upon his business ideas, getting between him and the rows of figures in his ledger, perplexing him with the last look she gave him, and the last musical word that had rung in his ears. He did not believe that he was going to fall in love with her—not when he was really in love with her—and found his sensations a nuisance.

And Harriet Wesden, who had already succumbed to the love-god, and been enraptured by the dulcet notes of the stranger, she thought Sidney Hinchford had not improved for the better; that his glasses rendered him almost plain, that his dry hard voice grated on her ears, and that he had even grown quite a cross-looking young man. She took occasion to tell him these unpleasant impressions with a sisterly frankness to which he appeared to object; gave him advice as to deportment, set of his neckerchief, size of his gloves, and only became a little thoughtful when she noted the effect which her advice had upon him, and the lamb-like docility with which he obeyed all her directions. Finally, all her spirits came back; she had her doubts as to the state of Sidney Hinchford's heart, and whether her first judgment on his personal appearance were correct in the main; she began to observe him more closely; life appeared to present an object in it once more; her vanity—for she was a girl who knew she was pretty, and was proud of the influence which her pretty face exercised—was flattered by his rapt attention; and though she should never love anybody again—never, never in all her life!—yet it was pleasant to know that Sidney was thinking of her, and to see how a smile or a frown of hers brightened his looks or cast them back into shadow.

Harriet Wesden was partial to experimentalizing on the effect which her appearance might create on society. She was not a strong-minded girl, who despised appearances; on the contrary, as weak and as vain as that Miss Smith or Miss Brown, whose demerits our wives discuss over their tea-tables. She was not strong-minded—she was pretty—and she was seventeen years of age!

If she went for a walk, or on a shopping excursion, she was particular about the bonnet she wore; and if young men and old men too, some of them, looked admiringly at her pretty face as they passed her, she was flattered at the attention in her heart, although she kept steadily on her way, and looked not right or left in her progress. If the army of nondescripts in the great drapers' was thrown into a small flutter at her appearance therein, and white

neckclothed servility struggled behind the boxes for the distinction of waiting on her, it was a gratification which she felt all the more for remaining so lady-like and unmoved on the high chair before the counter. She was a girl who knew her attractions, and was proud of them; but unfortunately she was a girl who knew but little else, and who thought but of little else just then. There was a pleasure in knowing that, let her step into any part of the London streets, people would notice her, even stop and look after her; and it did not strike her that there were other faces as pretty as hers, who received the same amount of staring and gaping at, and met with the same little "romantic" incidents occasionally.

From her boarding-school days, Harriet had been inclined to romance; the one foolish *escapade* had tinged life with romantic hues, and pretty as she was, her opinion of her own good looks was considerably higher than any one else's. She passed through life from seventeen to eighteen years of age taking everything as a compliment—flattered by the rude stares, the impertinent smiles from shallow-brained puppies who leer at every woman *en route!* rather pleased than otherwise if a greater idiot or a nastier beast than his contemporaries tracked her footsteps homewards, and lingered about Great Suffolk Street in the hope of seeing her again. All this the spell of her beauty which lured men towards her; all this without one thought of harm—simply an irresistible vanity that took delight in her influence, and was pleased with immoderate fooleries.

Pretty, vain, foolish, and fond of attention, on the one side; but good-tempered, good-hearted, and innocent of design on the other. A butterfly disposition, that would carry its owner through life if the sun shone, but would be whirled Heaven knows where in a storm. She would have been happy all her life, had all mankind been up to the dead level of honest intentions, which it is not, just at present, thanks to the poor wretches like us who get our living by story-telling.

Most young ladies constituted like Harriet Wesden have an ordeal to pass through for better for worse; if for worse, God help them! Harriet Wesden's came in due course.

It was, in the beginning, but another chapter of romance—another conquest! Love at first sight in London Streets, and the fervour of a new-born passion carrying the devotee out of the track, and leading him to follow in her footsteps, worshipping at a distance. It had occurred twice before, and was a compliment to the power of her charms—her heart quite fluttered at these little breaks in a somewhat monotonous existence. It was rather aggravating that the romance always ended in an old-fashioned bookseller's shop in Great Suffolk Street, where "the mysterious strangers" were jostled into the mud by people with baskets, and then run down by bawling costers with barrows. That was not a nice end to the story, and though she wished the story to conclude at the door, yet she would

have preferred something more graceful as a "wind-up Nevertheless, take it for all in all, a satisfactory proof that she had a face pretty enough to lure people out of their way, and rob them of their time—lead them without a "mite of encouragement" on her part to follow her fairy footsteps. If there were hypocrisy in her complaints to Mattie concerning the "impudence" of the fellows, she scarcely knew it herself; and Mattie would not believe in hypocrisy in the girl whom she served with a Balderstonian fidelity. The third fugitive adorer of the stationer's daughter was of a different stamp to his predecessors. He was one of a class—a gentleman by birth and position, and a prowler by profession. A prowler in fine clothes of fashionable cut, hanging about fashionable thoroughfares when London was in town, and going down to fashionable watering-places when London needed salt water. A man of the lynx order of bipeds, hunting for prey at all times and seasons, meeting with many rebuffs, and anon—and alas!—with sufficient encouragement, attracted by every fresh, innocent face; seeking it out as his profession; following it with a pertinacity that would have been creditable in any other pursuit—in fact, a scamp of the first water!

Harriet Wesden had gone westward in search of a book ordered by a customer, and had met this man, when homeward bound, in Regent Street. Harriet's face attracted him, and in a business-like manner, which told of long practice, he started in pursuit, regulating his conduct by the future manœuvres of the object in view. Harriet fluttered on her way homewards, conscious, almost by intuition, that she was followed; proceeding steadily in a south-eastern direction, and pertinaciously keeping the back of her straw bonnet to the pursuer. Had she looked behind once, our prowler would have increased his pace, and essayed to open a conversation—a half smile, even a look of interest, the ghost of an *œillade* would have been sufficient test of character for him, and he would have chanced his fortunes by a *coup d'état*.

But he was in doubt. Once in crossing the Strand, towards Waterloo Bridge, he managed to veer round and confront her, but she never glanced towards him; so with a consideration not generally apparent in prowlers, he contented himself with following her home. He had his time on his hands—he had not met with an adventure lately—he was approaching a region that was not well known to him, and the smell of which disgusted him; but there was a something in Harriet Wesden's face which took him gingerly along, and he was a man who always followed his adventures to an end. Cool, calculating and daring, he would have made an excellent soldier—being brought up as an idler, he turned out a capital scoundrel.

Harriet reached her own door and gave a half timid, half inquiring glance round, before she passed into the shop; our prowler took

stock of the name and the number—he had an admirable memory—examined everything in the shop window; walked on the opposite side of the way; looked up at the first and second floor, and met with nothing to reward his vigilance but the fierce face of old Hinchford; finally entered the shop and purchased some cigars, grinding his teeth quietly to himself over Mr. Wesden's suspicions of his sovereign being a counterfeit.

We should not have dwelt upon this incident, had it thus ended, or had no effect upon our story's progress. But, on the contrary, from the man's persistency strange results evolved.

Twice or thrice a week this tall, high-shouldered, moustached *roué*, of five-and-thirty, appeared in Suffolk Street—patronized the bookseller's shop by purchases—hulked about street corners, watching the house, and catching a glimpse of Harriet occasionally. This was the Brighton romance over again, only Harriet was a year older now, and the hero of the story was sallow-faced and sinister—there was danger to any modest girl in those little scintillating eyes of his; and that other hero had been much younger, and had really loved her, she believed!

Pertinacity appears like devotion to some minds, and our prowler had met with his reward more than once by keeping doggedly to his post; he held his ground therefore, and watched his opportunity. Harriet Wesden had become frightened by this time; the adventure had lost its romantic side, and there was something in her new admirer's face which warned even her, a girl of no great penetration.

Mattie was always Harriet's *confidante* in these matters—Harriet was fond of asking advice how to proceed, although she did not always take the same with good grace. That little, black-eyed *confidante* kept watch in her turn upon the prowler, and resolved in her mind the best method of action.

"I'm afraid of him, Mattie," whispered Harriet; "I should not like father to know he had followed me home, lest he should think I had given the man encouragement, and father can be very stern when his suspicions are aroused. Besides, I shouldn't like Sidney to know."

"But he wouldn't believe that you had given him encouragement; he thinks too much of you, I fancy."

"You're full of fancies, Mattie."

"And—oh! there's the man again, looking under the *London Journals*. How very much like the devil in a French hat he is, to be sure!"

This dialogue occurred in the back parlour, whilst Mrs. Wesden was upstairs, and Mr. Wesden in Paternoster Row in search of the December "monthlies"—and in the middle of it the devil in his French hat stepped, with his usual cool imperturbability, into the shop.

This procedure always annoyed Mattie; she saw through the pretence, and, though it brought custom to the establishment, still it aggravated her. It was playing at shop, and "making-believe" to want something; and shop with our humble heroine was an important matter, and not to be lightly trifled with. She had her revenge in her way by selling the prowler the driest, hardest, and most undrawable of cigars, giving him the penny Pickwicks for the mild Havannahs; she sold him fusees that she knew had been left in a damp place, and the outside periodicals, which had become torn and soiled—could she have discovered a bad sixpence in the till, I believe, in her peculiar ideas of retaliation, she would not have hesitated an instant in presenting it, with his change.

The gentleman of energy entered the shop then, rolled his eyes over the parlour blind towards Harriet, who sat at fancy-work by the fireside, finally looked at Mattie, who stood stolidly surveying him. Now energy without a result had considerably damped the ardour of our prowler, and he had resolved to push a little forward in the sapping and mining way. He was a man who had made feminine pursuit a study; he knew human weakness, and the power of the money he carried in his pockets. He was well up in Ovid and in the old comedies of a dissolute age, where the Abigail is always tempted before the mistress—and Mattie was only a servant of a lower order, easily to be worked upon, he had not the slightest doubt. There was a servant who did the scrubbing of the stones before the door, and sat half out of window polishing the panes, till she curdled his blood, but she was a red-faced, stupid girl, and as there was a choice, he preferred that shop-girl, "with the artful black eyes," as he termed them.

"Good morning, Miss."

"Good morning."

"Have you any—any more of those exceedingly nice cigars, Miss?"

"Plenty more of them."

"I'll take a shilling's-worth."

Mattie, always anxious to get him out of the shop, rolled up his cigars in paper, and passed them rapidly across the counter. The prowler, not at all anxious, unrolled the paper, drew forth his cigar-case, and proceeded to place the "Havannahs" very carefully one by one in their proper receptacles, talking about the weather and the business, and even complimenting Mattie upon her good looks that particular morning, till Mattie's blood began to simmer.

"You haven't paid me yet, Sir," she said, rather sharply.

"No, Miss—in one moment, if you will allow me."

After a while, during which Mattie moved from one foot to another in her impatience, he drew forth a sovereign and laid it on the counter

"We're short of change, Sir—if you have anything smaller ——"

"Nothing smaller, I am compelled to say, Miss."

Mattie hesitated. Under other circumstances, she would have left her shop, ran into the pork-butcher's next door, and procured change, after a hint to Harriet to look to the business; but she detected the *ruse* of the prowler, and was not to be outwitted. She opened her till again, and found fourteen shillings in silver—represented by a preponderance of threepenny pieces, but that was of no consequence, save that it took him longer to count—and from a lower drawer she drew forth one of many five-shilling packets of coppers, which pawnbrokers and publicans on Saturday nights were glad to give Mr. Wesden silver for, and laid it down with a heavy dab on the counter.

"What—what's that?" he ejaculated.

"That's ha'pence—that's all the change we've got—and I can't leave the shop," said Mattie, briskly. "You can give me my cigars back and get change for yourself, if you don't like it."

"Thank you," was the suave answer, "I was not thinking much about the change. If you will buy yourself a new bonnet with it, you will be conferring a favour upon me."

"And what favour will you want back?" asked Mattie, quickly.

"Oh! I will leave that to time and your kindness—come, will you take it and be friends with me? I want a friend in this quarter very much."

He pushed the silver and the cumbrous packet of coppers towards her. He was inclined to be liberal. He remembered how many he had dazzled in his time by his profuse munificence. Money he had never studied in his life, and by the strange rule of contraries, he had had plenty of it.

Mattie was impulsive—even passionate, and the effort to corrupt her allegiance to the Wesdens fired her blood to a degree that she even wondered at herself shortly afterwards.

"Take yourself out of this shop, you bad man," she cried, "and your trumpery change too! Be off with you before I call a policeman, or throw something at you—you great big coward, to be always coming here insulting us!"

With her impatient hands she swept the money off the counter, five-shilling packet of coppers and all, which fell with a crash, and disgorged its contents on the floor.

"What—what do you mean?" stammered the prowler.

"I mean that it's no good you're coming here, and that nobody wants to see you here again, and that I'll set the policeman on you next time you give me any of your impudence. Get out with you, you coward!"

Mattie thought her one threat of a policeman sufficient; she had still a great reverence for that official personage, and believed that his very name must strike terror to guilty hearts. The effect upon

her auditor led her to believe that she had been successful; but he was only alarmed at Mattie's loud voice, and the stoppage of two boys and a woman at the door.

"I—I don't know what you mean—you're mad," he muttered, and then slunk out of the shop, leaving his cumbrous change for a sovereign spread over the stationer's floor. Mattie went round the counter and collected the *débris* of mammon, minus one threepenny piece which she could not discern anywhere, but which Mr. Wesden, toiling under his monthly parcel, detected in one corner immediately upon his entrance.

"Why, Mattie, what's this?—MONEY—*on the floor!*"

"A gentleman dropped his change, Sir."

"Put it on the shelf, he'll be back for it presently."

"No, I don't think he will," was Mattie's dry response.

CHAPTER V.

PERSEVERANCE.

MATTIE in her self-conceit imagined that she had frightened the prowler from Great Suffolk Street; in lieu thereof, she had only deterred him from entering a second appearance on the premises. He had made a false move, and reaped the bitter consequence. He must be more wary, if he built upon making an impression on Harriet Wesden's heart—more cautious, more of a strategist. So he continued to prowl at a distance, and to watch his opportunity from the same point of view. Presently it would come, and with the advantage of his winning tongue, which could roll off elegant phrases by the yard, he trusted to make an impression on a shopkeeper's daughter.

For a moment, and after his rebuff, he had hesitated as to the expediency of continuing the siege; but his pride was aroused; it was an unpleasant end to his plans, and the chance had not presented itself yet of trying his fortune with Miss Wesden herself. Presently the hour would come; he did not despair yet; he bided his time with great patience.

The time came a fortnight after that little incident in the Suffolk Street shop. Harriet Wesden was coming down the Borough towards home one wet night when he accosted her. It was getting late for one thing, and rainy for another, and Harriet was making all the haste home that she could, when he made her heart leap into her throat by his sudden "Good evening, Miss."

One glance at him, the nipping of a little scream in the bud, and then she increased her pace, the prowler keeping step with her.

"Will you favour me by accepting half my umbrella, Miss Wesden—for one instant then, whilst I venture to explain what may seem conduct the reverse of gentlemanly to you?"

"No, Sir, I wish to hear nothing—I wish to be left alone."

"I have been very rude—I will ask your pardon, Miss Wesden, very humbly. But let me beg of you to listen to this explanation of my conduct."

"There is nothing to explain, Sir."

"Pardon me, but there is. Pardon me, but this is not the way you would have treated Mr. Darcy had he been in my place."

Harriet gasped for breath. Mr. Darcy, the hero of her Brighton folly, the name which she had never confessed to a living soul, the only man in the world who she thought could have taunted her with indiscretion, and of being weak and frivolous rather than a rude and forward girl! Harriet did not reply; she looked at him closely, almost tremblingly, and then continued her hurried progress homewards; the prowler, seeing his advantage, maintained his position by her side, keeping the umbrella over her.

"Mr. Darcy was an intimate friend of mine before he went to India; we were together at Brighton, Miss Wesden—more than once he has mentioned your name to me."

"Indeed," she murmured.

"You would like to hear that he is well, perhaps."

"I am glad to hear that," Miss Wesden ventured to remark.

"He is in India still—I believe will remain there, marry and settle down there for good."

"Have you been watching my house to tell me this?"

"Partly, and partly for other reasons, for which I have a better excuse. I have been a wanderer—in search of happiness many years, and for the first time in a life not unadventurous there crosses my——"

"Good evening, Sir. I have been entrapped into a conversation. I must beg you to leave me."

Harriet set off at the double again—in double quick time went the prowler after her.

People abroad that night began to notice the agitated girl, and the tall man marching on at her side, who, in his eagerness to keep step, trod on people's feet, and sent one doctor's boy, basket and bottles, crunching against a lamp-post; one or two stopped and

looked after them and then continued their way—it was a race between the prowler and his victim, the prowler making a dead heat of it.

Harriet gave in at last—her spirit was not a very strong one, and she stopped and burst into tears.

"Sir, will you leave me?—will you believe that I don't want to hear a single word of your reasons for thus persecuting me?"

"Miss Wesden, only allow me to explain, and I will go my way and never see you more. I will vanish away in the darkness, and let all the bright hopes I have fostered float away on the current which bears you away from me."

"Go, pray do go, if you are a gentleman. I must appeal to some one for protection, if you——"

"Miss Wesden, you must hear me—you shall hear me. I am not a child; I am——"

"A scoundrel, evidently," said a harsh voice in his ears, and the instant afterwards Sidney Hinchford, with two fiery eyes behind his spectacles, stood between him and the girl he was persecuting. Harriet, with a little cry of joy, clung to the arm of her deliverer; the prowler looked perplexed, then put the best face upon the matter that he could extemporize for the occasion.

"Who are you, Sir?" was the truly English expletive.

"My name is Hinchford—my address is at your service, if you wish it. Now, Sir, your name—and *business?*"

"I decline to give it."

"You have insulted this lady, a friend of mine. Apologise," cried young Hinchford, in much such a tone as an irritable officer summons his company to shoulder arms.

"Sir, your tone is not calculated to induce me to oblige *you*. If Miss Wesden thinks that I——"

"APOLOGISE!" shouted Hinchford, a second time. He had forgotten the respect due to his charge, and shaken her hand from his arm; he was making a little scene in the street, and convulsing Harriet with fright; he was face to face with the prowler, his tall, well-knit form, evidently a match for his antagonist; he was chivalrous, and scarcely twenty years of age; above all, he was in a towering passion, and verged a little on the burlesque, as passionate people generally do.

As if by the touch of a magic wand, a crowd sprang up around them; respectable passers-by, the pickets of the Kent Street gang on duty in the Borough, unwashed men and women who had been seeking shelter under shop-blinds, the doctor's boy who had been maltreated and had a claim to urge for damages, a fish-woman, two tradesmen with their aprons on fresh from business, and shoals of boys that might have dropped from Heaven, so suddenly did they take up the best places, and assume an interest in the adventure.

The prowler turned pale, and flinched a little as Sidney approached.

flinched more as the audience seized the thread of discussion and expressed its comments more vociferously.

"Punch his head if he don't 'pologise, Sir—throw him into the mud, Sir—I'd cure him of coming after *my* gal—knock the bloke's hat off, and jump on it—lock him up!"

The prowler saw his danger; he had heard a great deal of the mercies of a London mob, and it was hemming him in now—and like most men of the prowling class, he was at heart a coward. He succumbed.

"I never intended to insult the lady—if I have uttered a word to offend her, I am very sorry. It is all a misconception. But if the lady considers that I have taken a liberty in offering—in offering," he repeated, rather disturbed in his harangue by a violent shove from behind on to the unhappy doctor's boy, upon whose feet he alighted, "a common courtesy, I apologise with all my heart. I——"

"That will do, Sir," was the curt response; "you have had a narrow escape. Take it as a lesson."

Sidney was glad to back out of the absurd position into which he had thrust Harriet, to draw her hand through his arm and hasten away, offering a hundred excuses to her for his imprudence and impulsiveness.

He had not moved twenty yards with her when the yell of the mob—and the mob in that end of London possesses the finest blood-curdling yell in the world—startled him and all within half a mile of him. It was a dull night, and the wild elements of street life were fond of novelty; a swell had been caught insulting a British female in distress, and the unwashed hate swells like poison. An apology was not sufficient for the lookers-on; prostration on bended knees and hands outstretched would not have done; sackcloth and ashes vowed for the remainder of the delinquent's existence, would have been treated with contumely—all that was wanted was an uproar. The boys wanted an uproar because it was natural to them; the representatives of Kent Street, because it was in the way of trade, and one or two respectable gents had become interested in the dispute, and wore watch-chains; the women, because "*he* had not been sarved out as he desarved, the wretch!"

So the prowler, backing out of the crowd, met with a sledge-nammer hand upon his hat, and found his hat off, and mud in his face, and then fists, and finally an upheaving of the whole mass towards him, sending him into the roadway like a shell from an Armstrong gun. There was no help for it, the prowler must run, and run he did, pursued by the terrible mob and that more terrible yell which woke up every recess in the Borough; and in this fashion the pursuer and the pursued sped down the muddy road towards the "Elephant and Castle."

An empty Hansom cab offered itself to the runaway; he leaped in

whilst it was being slowly driven down the Borough, and dashed his fist through the trap.

"Drive fast—double fare—REFORM!"

The Hansom rattled off, the mob uttered one more despairing yell, and, after a slight abortive effort, gave up the chase, and left the prowler to his repentance.

And he did repent of mixing with life over the water,—for Great Suffolk Street never saw him again.

CHAPTER VI.

"IN THE FULNESS OF THE HEART," ETC.

"OH! Harriet, I am very sorry," burst forth Sidney, when the noise had died away, and Harriet Wesden, pale and silent, walked on by his side with her trembling hand upon his arm.

Harriet did not reply—her dignity had been outraged, and his defence had not greatly assisted her composure, though it had answered the purpose for which it was intended.

Sidney gulped down a lump in his throat, and glanced at the pretty, agitated face.

"You are offended with me—well, I deserve it. I'm a beast."

This self-depreciatory verdict having consoled him, and elicited no response from Harriet, he continued,

"I acted like a fool; I should have taken it coolly; why, he was more the gentleman of the two, scamp as he was. By George, I was near smashing him, though! Harriet," with eagerness, "you will look over my outburst. You're not so very much offended, are you?"

"No, I'm not offended, only the mob frightened me, and you were very violent. I don't know what else you could have done."

"Knocked him down and walked on, or given him in charge; knocked him down quietly would have been the most satisfactory method. How did it begin?"

"He followed and spoke to me. He has been hanging about the house for weeks."

"The dev—I beg pardon—has he though?"

Sidney Hinchford walked on; he had become suddenly thoughtful. More strongly than ever it recurred to him what a mistake he had made in not knocking down the prowler in a quiet and graceful manner.

"Mattie has noticed it, and spoken to him about it, but he would not go away."

"Did he ever speak to you before to-night?"

"Never."

"He's a great blackguard!" Sidney blurted forth; "but there's an end of him. He'll not trouble you any more, Harriet; he did not know that you had a big brother to take care of you. These sort of fellows object to big brothers—they're in the way so much."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You oughtn't to go out at this time of night alone," he added after awhile; "it isn't exactly the thing, you know."

"No one spoke to me before."

"N—no, but it is not what *I* call proper."

"What you call proper, Mr. Hinchford!—I'm sure I——"

"I beg pardon; of course anything that I—I think proper, is of no consequence to you. It's only my way of speaking out—rather too plainly. I offend the clerks in the office at times and—and of course it's no business of mine, Harriet, although I did hope once that it would be. *There!*"

Harriet saw what was coming, or rather what had come. She was alarmed, although this was not her first offer, and the bloom of novelty had been lightly brushed off by that boarding-school folly of which she felt more ashamed every day. She began walking very fast, in much the same way from his passionate words as she had done from the frothy vapidity of that man, extinguished for ever.

Sidney walked on with her; her hand was sliding from his arm when he made a clutch at it, and held it rather firmly. He went at his love affairs in a straightforward manner—his earnestness making up for his lack of eloquence.

"I know I've done it!" he said; "I know I should have kept this back a year or two—perhaps altogether—but it would't answer, and it has made me miserable, out of sorts, and an enigma to the old dad. I'm only just twenty—of no position yet, but with a great hope to make one—I'm sure that I should love you all my life, and never be happy without you—can you put up with a fellow like me, and say I may hope to teach you to love me some day?"

A strange fear beset Harriet—a fear of answering before the whirl of events had given her time to consider. She had never seriously thought of pledging herself to him; though her woman's quickness had guessed at his secret long since, she had never dreamed of him or felt her heart beat for him, as for that first love who had won her girl's fancy, and then faded away like a dream-figure. She was

agitated from the preceding events of that night, and now in an unlucky moment, he added to her embarrassment and made her brain whirl—she was scarcely herself, and did not answer like herself.

"Let go my hand, Sir—let me go home. I don't want to hear any more!"

"Very well," he answered; and was silent the rest of the way home—leaving her without a word in the shop, and passing through that side door reserved for the Hinchfords for the last thirteen years. Harriet, trembling and excited, almost stumbled into the back parlour, and began to sob forth a part of the adventures of that evening. Sidney, like the ghost of himself, stalked into the first-floor front, where his father was keeping a late tea for him.

The anxious eyes of the father glanced from under the bushy white brows; he was a student of human nature, so far as his son was concerned at least.

"Anything wrong, Sid?"

"N—no," was the hesitative answer.

"You look troubled."

"I am tired—dead beat."

"Let us go on with the tea then," he said, assuming a cheery voice; "here's the *Times*, Sid."

"I have read it," was the hollow answer.

"Oh! I haven't—any news?"

"Tea gone up with a rush, I believe."

"Ah! good for the firm, I hope."

"Believe so—don't know. Phew! how infernally hot this room gets!"

Mr. Hinchford hazarded no more remarks—the curt replies of his son were sufficient indication of a reluctance to attend to him. He set out the tea-table, and superintended the duties thereof in a grave, fatherly manner, glancing askance at his son over the rim of his tea-cup. Sidney was in a mood that troubled the sire—for it was an unusual mood and suggested something very much out of the way.

"After tea, Sidney would compose himself and relate what had happened in the City to disturb him, and led him to respond churlishly to the old father, who had never given him a cross word in his life. He would wait Sidney's good time—there was no good hurrying the lad.

These two were something more than father and son; their long companionship together, unbroken upon by other ties, had engendered a concentrative affection which was a little out of the common—which more resembled in some respects the love existent between a good mother and daughter. They were friends, confidants, inseparable companions as well. The son's ambition was the father's, and all that interested and influenced the one equally affected the other. Sidney had made no friends from the counting-house or warehouse

clerks; they were not "his sort," and he shunned their acquaintance. He was a young man of an unusual pattern, a trifle more grave than his years warranted, and endued with more forethought than the whole business put together. He looked at life sternly—too sternly for his years—and his soul was absorbed in rising to a good position therein, for his father's sake as well as his own. His father was growing old; his memory was not so good as it used to be. Sid fancied that the time would shortly come when the builders would discover his father's defects, dismiss him with a week's salary, and find a younger and sharper man to supply his place. That was simply business in a commercial house; but it was death to the incapables, whom sharp practice swept out of the way. Sidney felt that he had no time to lose; that there must come a day when his father's position would depend upon himself; when he should have to work for both, as his father had worked for him when he was young and helpless and troublesome. Sidney's employers were kind, more than that, they were deeply interested in the strange specimen of a young man who worked hard, objected to holidays, and took work home with him when there was a pressure on the firm; he was honest, energetic, and truthful, and a servant with those requisites is always worth his weight in gold. They had conferred together, and resolved to make a partner of him in due course, when he was of age, or when he was five-and-twenty; and Sidney, though he had never been informed of their intentions, guessed it by some quick instinct, read it in their faces, and believed that good luck would fall to his share some day. Still he never spoke of his hopes, save once to his father in a weak moment, of which he ever after repented, for his father was of a more sanguine nature, and inclined to build his castles too rapidly. Sidney knew the uncertainties of life—more especially of City life—and he proceeded quietly on his way, keeping his hopes under pressure, and talking and thinking like a clerk in the City who never expected to reach higher than two or three hundred a year.

Yet with all his prudence he was, singular to relate, not of a reticent nature; he was a young man who spoke out, and hated mystery or suspense

Possibly in this last instance he had spoken out too quickly for Harriet Wesden; and though suspense was over, he did not feel pleased with his tactics of that particular evening. And he *was* inclined to keep back all the unpleasant reminiscences of that night, sink them for ever in the waters of oblivion, and never let a soul know what an ass he had made of himself. It was his first imprudence, and he was aggrieved at it; he had given way to impulse, and suffered his love to escape at an unpropitious moment—his ears burned to think of all the folly which he had committed.

In a bad temper—he who was generally so calm and equable—he

took his tea, and shunned his father's inspection by turning his back upon him. After a while he took up the *Times*, which he had previously declined, and feigned an interest in the "Want Places." Mattie came in and out of the room with the hot water, &c., she waited on the Hinchfords when Ann of all work was weak in the ankles, which was of frequent occurrence. Mattie made herself generally useful, and rather liked trouble than not. With a multiplicity of tasks on her mind, she was always more cheerful; it was only when there was nothing to do that her face assumed a sternness of expression as if the shadow of her early days were settling there.

Mattie, bustling to and fro in attendance upon the Hinchfords, observed all and said nothing, like a sensible girl. She was quick enough to see that something unusual had happened above stairs as well as below, and her interest was as great in these two friends —and *helpers*—as in the Wesdens. She would have everybody happy in that house—it had been a lucky house for her, and it should be for all in it, if she possessed the power to make it so!

She saw that one trouble had come at least; and looking intently at Sidney's grim face—she had busied herself with the bread and butter plate to get a good look at it—she read its story more plainly than he would have liked.

Outside the door she paused and put "this and that together"—*this* in the drawing-room, and *that* in the parlour, and jumped at once at the right conclusion, with a rapidity that did infinite credit to her seventeen years. Seventeen years then, and rather shorter than ever, if that were possible.

"He has been courting Harriet—I know he has!" she said; "and Harriet's been in a tantrum, and said something to cross him —that's it!"

She missed a step and shook up the tea-things that she was carrying downstairs. This recalled her to the duties of her situation.

"One thing at a time, Mattie, my dear," she said, in a patronizing way to herself, as she descended to the lower regions. In those lower regions poor Ann Packet created another divergence of thought. Ann's ankles continued to swell—she had been much on her feet during the last heavy wash, and the gloomy thought had stolen to her, that her new calamity—she was a woman born for calamities—would end in the hospital.

This idea having just seized her, she communicated it at once to Mattie, upon her re-appearance in the kitchen.

"Mattie," said Ann, lugubriously, "I've been a good friend to you, all my life—ain't I?"

"To be sure you have," was the quick answer.

"When you came here first, a reg'lar young rip, I took to you, taught you what was tidiness, which you didn't know any more than the babe unborn, did you?"

"Not much more—don't you feel so well to-night, Ann?

"Much wus—I'm only forty, and my legs oughtn't to go at that age."

"No, and they won't."

"*Won't* they?" was the ironical answer; but they will—but they has! Oh! Mattie, gal, you'll come and see me at St. Tummas's?"

"Ann Packet," said Mattie gravely, "this won't do. You're getting your old horrors again, and you're full of fancies, and your ankles are not half so bad as you think they are. I know what *you* want."

"What?"

"A good shaking," laughed Mattie, "that's all."

"Oh! you unnat'ral child!"

"Well, the unnat'ral child will ask Mr. Wesden if she may keep out of the shop to-night, and bring a book downstairs to read to you, over your needlework. But if you don't work I shan't read, Ann—is it a bargain?"

"You're allus imperent; but get the book, if master 'll let you. Oh! how *they* do shoot!"

Mattie obtained permission, brought down a book from the store, and sat down to read to honest Ann. She had made a good choice, and Ann was soon interested, forgot her ailments, and stitched away with excitable rapidity. Mattie had no time for thoughts of her own, or the new mystery above stairs till the supper hour. She read on till the Hinchford bell rang once more; then she closed the book, and met with her reward in Ann's large red hand falling heavily, yet affectionately, on her shoulder.

"Thankee, Mattie. I'll do as much for you some day, gal."

"When you can spell, or when I've gouty ankles, Ann?"

"Ah! get out with you!—I'm only fit for making game on, you think. I'm a poor woman, who never had the time to larn to read, and the likes of you can laugh at me."

"No, only try to make you laugh, Ann. You're not cross?"

"God bless you!—not I," she ejaculated spasmodically. "There, go about your work, and don't think anything of what an old fool like me talks about."

Mattie busied herself with the supper tray, the bread, cheese, knives and plates, and then bore them away in her strong arms; Ann watched her out of the room, and then produced an indifferently clean cotton handkerchief, with which she wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"To think how that gal has altered since she first came here, a little ragged thing," soliloquized Ann, "a gal who skeered you with the wulgar words she'd picked up in the streets, and was so awful ignorant, you blushed for her. And now the briskiest and best of gals; if I don't spend all my money in doctors' stuff afore I die, that Mattie shall have every penny of it. It's in my will so; they

put it down in black and white for me, and she'll never know it till I'm—I'm gone!"

A prospect that caused Ann Packet to weep afresh; a dismal, but a soft-hearted woman, who had passed through life with no one to love, until she met with the stray. She was a stray herself, picked up at the workhouse gate, to the disgust of the relieving officer, and turned out to service as soon as she could walk and talk, and a mistress be found for her—lonely in the world herself, she had, when the time came round, taken to one more forelorn and friendless than ever she had been. And she *had* left her all her money—fourteen pounds, seven and sevenpence, put out at interest, two and seven eighths, in the Finsbury Savings Bank, whither her ankles refused to carry her to get her book made up, another trouble at that time which kept her mind unsettled.

CHAPTER VII.

CONFIDENCE.

Whilst Mattie read to her fellow-workman consolation was also being attempted in the drawing-room that she had quitted. Consolation attempted by the father after a while to his son.

After a while, for an hour passed before a word was exchanged, and Sidney Hinchford still held the newspaper before him, staring at it, without comprehending a word. A singular position for him to adopt; a youth of twenty, who never wasted time, who had always something on his hands to fill up his evenings at home, who was very often too busy to play backgammon with his father.

That father was troubled; his heart was in his son's peace of mind; there was nothing that he would not have sacrificed for it, had it lain in his power. His pride was in his son's advancement, his son's ability, and he fancied that a great trouble had occurred at the business to change the scene in which both played their parts. He was less strong-minded and more nervous than he had been four years ago, and so less affected him.

When the hour had passed, and he had grown tired of Sidney's silence, he said, with something of his son's straightforwardness,

"What's the matter, Sid?"

Sidney crumpled the paper in his hands, and flung it on the table; he was tired, even a little ashamed of his sullen deportment.

"A matter that I ought to keep to myself, it being a foolish one, Sir," he answered; "but, if you wish, I will relate it."

"If *you* wish, Sid," was the courteous answer; "I have no wish to hear anything that you would desire to keep back from me. If you think I can be of no use to you, give you no advice, offer no consolation that you may think worthy of acceptance, and if," with a very wistful glance towards him, "you consider it a matter that concerns yourself alone, why I—I dont wish to intrude upon your confidence."

"I don't think that we have had any secrets from each other yet; I don't see any reason why we should begin to get mysterious, father," Sidney replied; "and so, here's the full, true, and particular account."

Mr. Hinchford edged his chair nearer to his son, the son turned and looked his father in the face, blushing just a little at the beginning of his narrative.

"It's an odd thing for one *man* to tell another," he said quickly, "but it's what you ought to know, and though it makes me wince a little, it's soon over. I've been thinking of engaging myself to——"

"Not to another firm, Sid—*now?*" cried the father, as he paused.

"To Harriet Wesden, downstairs."

"God bless me!"

Mr. Hinchford passed his hands through his scanty white hairs, stroked his moustache, blew at an imaginary something in the air, loosened his stock, and gasped a little. His son engaging himself to be married was a new element to perplex him; he had never believed in human nature, or the Hinchford nature, taking that turn for years and years. Once or twice he had thought that his careful son might some day look around him and *marry well;* but that at twenty years of age he should have fallen in love, was a miracle that took some minutes to believe in.

"Well," he said at last.

"I should have said, father, that I had been thinking of an engagement—a long one to end in a happy marriage, when there was fair sailing for all of us—and that my thoughts found words when I least expected them, and surprised Harriet by their suddenness. I told her I loved her, and she told me that she didn't—and there's an end of it! We need not speak of the affair again, you know."

"'And that she didn't!'" quoted the father, "why, that's more amazing still!"

"On the contrary, that is the most natural part of it."

"And she really said—"

"She said that she did not want any more of my jaw—rather more elegantly expressed, but that is what she meant. Well, I *was* a fool!"

Mr. Hinchford sat and reflected, becoming graver every instant. He did not attempt to make light of the story, to treat it as one of those trifles 'light as air,' which a breath would disperse. His son's was neither a frivolous nor a romantic nature, and he treated even his twenty years with respect. Mr. Hinchford was astonished also at his own shortsightedness; the strangeness of this love passage darting across the monotony of his quiet way, without a flash from the danger signal by way of hint at its approach. He saw how it was to end, very clearly now, he thought; Harriet Wesden and his son would contract an early engagement, marry in haste, and cut him off by a flank movement from his son's society. He saw the new loves replacing the old, and himself white-haired and feeble, isolated from the boy to whom his heart yearned. He scarcely knew how he had idolized his son, until the revelation of this night. Still he was one of the least selfish men in the world; Sidney's happiness first, and then the thought how best to promote his own.

After a few more questions and answers, Mr. Hinchford mastered the position of affairs. Harriet Wesden loved his boy—that was a certainty, and to be expected—and her timid embarrassment at Sid's sudden proposal, and her nervous escape from it, were but natural in that sex which poor Sid knew so little concerning. And the Wesdens, *père et mère*, why they would be proud of the match; for Sid's abilities would make a gentleman of him, and Sid in good time —all in good time—would raise the stationer's daughter to a position, of which she might well be proud! He liked the Wesdens, but—heigho!—he had looked forward to his boy doing better in the world, finding a wife more suitable for him in the future.

It was all plain enough, but he furbished up his philosophy, nevertheless—that odd philosophy which, at variance with his brighter thoughts, sought to prepare those to whom it appealed for the worst that might happen. He looked at the worst aspect of things, whilst his heart had not a doubt of the best; he would have prepared all the world for the keenest disappointments, and been the man to give way most, and to be the most astounded at the result, had his prophecies come true. Years ago he foretold Mattie's ingratitude and duplicity in return for his patronage; but he had not believed a word of his forebodings. He had told his son not to build upon so improbable a thing as a partnership with his employers at so early an age; but he was more feverishly expectant than his son, and so positive that his son's abilities would be thus

rewarded, that his pride had expanded of late years, and he talked more like the rich man he had been once himself.

Mr. Hinchford prepared his son for the worst that evening; and the son, knowing his character, felt a shadow removed at every dismal conjecture as to how the little love affair would terminate.

"You can't let it rest here, however bad it may turn out, Sid."

"No, of course not."

"You must see Harriet's father in the morning, and make a clean breast of it; and then if he turn you off with a short word—feeling himself a rich man, and above the connection—why, you will put up with it gravely, and like a Hinchford. There are a great many things against your chances, my boy."

"We're both too young, perhaps," suggested Sidney, more dolefully.

"Years too young," was the reply; "and people have unpleasant habits of changing their minds—and then what a fix it would be, Sid! Why, Harriet Wesden's not eighteen till next month—quite a child!"

"No, I'm hanged if she is!" burst forth Sidney.

"Well then, you're but a boy, after all; and these long and early engagements are bad things for both. But still, as it has come, you must speak to the old people; and if they have no objection—which I think they will have—and Harriet is inclined to accept you—which I think she isn't—why, make the best of it, work on in the old sure and steady fashion—you're worth waiting for, my lad."

"Thank you, dad," was the reply; "you're very kind, but your opinion of me is not the world's. I'm a cross-grained, unforgiving, disagreeable person—there!"

"In your enemy's estimation—but your friends?"

"I don't know that I have any."

"Oh! we shall see—and if you have not any abroad," he added, "you must put up with the old one at home, Sid."

"He will put up with me, I hope; he will remember that I have only him yet awhile to tell my hopes and fears to, standing in the place of the mother."

"Ah! the good mother, lost so early to us!—she should have heard this story, Sid."

The old man snatched up the paper and began reading; the son turned to his own work at last, and was soon buried in accounts. But the paper was uninteresting, and the accounts foggy; after a while both gave it up, and talked again of the old subject. Sid's full heart overflowed that night, and his reticence belonged not to it; he was sure of sympathy with his feelings, and had the mother—ever a gentle and dear listener—been at his side, he could not have more fully dwelt upon the love which had troubled him so long, and which he had kept so well concealed. It had grown with his growth, Harriet's playfellow, Harriet's brother, finally Harriet's

lover. Page after page, chapter of the story after chapter which begins ever the same, and only darts off at a tangent when the crisis, such as his, comes in due course, to end in various ways—happily, deplorably—in the sunshine of comedy, the mystery of melo-drama, the darkness of tragedy, taking its hues from the "surroundings," and giving us poor scribes no end of subjects to write upon.

Mr. Hinchford was a patient listener; other men might have been wearied by the romantic side to a love-sick youth's character; but Sid was a part of himself, and he had no ambition, no hope in which his son did not stand in the foreground, a bright figure to keep him rejoicing.

Supper served and over, Sidney retired to his share of the double-bedded room at the back—the shabby room with which Mr. Hinchford had lately grown disgusted, and even wished to quit, knowing not his son's reasons for remaining—leaving the father to fill his after-supper pipe before the fire. Mr. Hinchford was in a reflective, wide-awake mood, and not inclined for rest just then; he sat with his slippered feet on the fender, puffing away at his meerschaum. Had he not promised his son to keep away from Mr. Wesden until the *dénouement* had been brought about by Sid's own method, he would have gone down stairs and talked it over with the old people; but the promise given, he would sit there and think of his son's chances, and pray for them, as they were nearest his heart then.

He was a father who understood human nature a little, not so much as he fancied himself, but who was, nevertheless, a man of discernment, when his simple vanity did not stand in the way.

He had not thought deeply of Harriet Wesden before; now that there loomed before him a prospect of calling her "daughter," he conjured up every reminiscence connected with her, and set himself to think whether such a girl were likely to make Sid happy, or to love Sid as that pure-hearted, honest lad deserved. He was astonished, after a while, at the depth of his researches into the past; he could remember her a light-hearted child, a vivacious girl, now, presto, a woman, whom Sid sought for a wife; he could see her flitting before him, a pretty girl, swayed a little by the impulse of the hour, and verging on extremes; he called to mind certain traits of character that had struck him more than once, and had then been forgotten in the hurrying passage of events foreign to her; he sat studying an abstruse volume, and perplexing himself with its faintly written characters. Mothers have had such thoughts, and made them the business of a life, sorrowing and rejoicing over them, and praying for their children's future; seldom fathers, before whom are ever the counting-house in the City, the bargains to be made in the mart or on the exchange, the accommodation to be had at the bankers'.

Hinchford thought like a woman; he was a clerk whose business thoughts ended when he came home at night, and he was alone in

the world with one hope. All the old worldly thoughts lay apart from him, and the affections of paternity were stronger within him in consequence. He lived for Sid, not for himself.

He was still in a brown study, when the shuffling feet of Mrs. Wesden, being assisted up stairs by her husband to the top back room, disturbed him for an instant; then the rustle of a dress, and the light footfall of the daughter, assured him of Harriet's retirement. All was still in that crowded house which he had wished to exchange a year ago for a house in the suburbs, suitable to the united salaries of himself and boy. He thought of that wish, and sighed to think it had not been carried out, for, after all, he was not quite satisfied with the turn affairs had taken.

The door opened suddenly and startled his nerves. He turned a scared face towards the intruder, who jumped a little at the sight of him sitting before the grate, black, yawning and uninviting at that hour.

"I thought you had gone, Mr Hinchford," said Mattie; "I came up for the supper tray and to tidy up a bit here, and save time in the morning."

"How's Ann?" he asked absently.

"Better, I think," replied Mattie, still standing at the door.

"You can clear away—I'm going in a minute. How's the evening school, girl?"

"Why, I have left it this twelvemonth!"

"To be sure—I had forgotten that you had learned all that they could teach you, and had become too much of a woman. Why, we shall hear of you being married next."

"Who's going to be married *now—Mr. Sidney?*"

"Confound you! how sharp you are," said Mr. Hinchford a little dismayed; "no, I never said so—mind I never said a word, so don't let us have any ridiculous tattling."

"I never tattle," said Mattie, in an offended tone. "Oh! Mr. Hinchford," she added suddenly, "you can always trust *me* with anything."

"I hope so, Mattie—I hope so."

"And if Mr. Sidney thinks of marrying our Harriet, you may trust me not to let the people round here know a word about it. Not a word, Sir!" she repeated, with pursed lips.

Mr. Hinchford ran his hands through his hair, and loosened his stock again. He was confused, he had betrayed his hand, and made a mess of it, or else Mattie knew more than he gave her credit for, it was doubtful which.

"Mattie," he said, after a while, when that young woman, rapid in her movements, had packed the tray and was proceeding to retire with it.

"Yes, Sir."

She left the table and came near to him.

"Whatever made you think that my dear boy was likely to—to take a fancy to Harriet?"

"I've noticed that he talks to her a good deal, and comes into the back parlour a great deal, and brightens up when she speaks to him, and you can see his eyes dancing away behind the little spectacles he's taken to—and very becoming they are, Sir."

"Very," asserted the old gentleman.

"And he's always dull when she's out, and fidgets till he knows where she has gone, and tries to make me tell; and so I've fancied, oh! ever so long, that Harriet and he would make a match of it some day."

He was amazed at this girl ascertaining the truth before himself, but he retained his cool demeanour.

"Some long day hence, mayhap—who can tell?"

"Love's as uncertain as life—isn't it, Sir?"

"Ahem—yes."

"At least, I've read so," corrected Mattie. "It's a thing I shall never understand, Mr. Hinchford."

"Time enough—time enough, my girl."

"But our Harriet, she's pretty, she's a lady, she's meant to be loved by everybody she meets, and she's the only one that's good enough to marry *him*."

She lowered her voice at the last word, and made a quick movement with her hand in the direction of the adjoining room.

"You are very fond of Harriet, Mattie?" said Mr. Hinchford, curiously.

"As I need be, Sir, surely."

"Ah! surely—she is amiable and kind."

"Always so, I think."

"A little thoughtless, perhaps—eh?"

He was curious concerning Harriet Wesden now—no match-making mother could have taken more indirect and artful means to elicit the truth concerning her child's elect.

"Why, that's it!" exclaimed Mattie; "that's why Mr. Sidney ought to marry her."

"Oh! is it?"

"You'll see, Sir," said Mattie, suddenly drawing a chair close to Mr. Hinchford, and assuming a position on the edge thereof; "you'll soon see, Sir, what I mean by that."

"Yes—yes."

It was a strange picture, with an odd couple in the foreground; Harriet Wesden, Sidney Hinchford, or afflicted Ann Packet, coming in suddenly, would have been puzzled what to make of it. The burlesque side of the scene did not strike Mr. Hinchford till long afterwards; the slight figure of the girl on the chair before him, the rapid manner in which she expounded her theory, her animation, sudden gestures, and above all his own intense interest in the theme,

and forgetfulness of the confidence he placed in her by his own absorbent *pose*. He had put his pipe aside, and, open-mouthed and round-eyed, was drinking in every word, clutching his knees with his hands meanwhile.

"Mr. Sidney isn't thoughtless. He's careful, and he has a reason for everything, and he will keep her from harm all her life. She'll be the best and brightest of wives to him, if they should ever marry, which I do hope and pray they will, Sir, soon. I'm sure there are no two who would make a happier couple, and oh!—to see them happy," clapping her hands together, "what would *I* give!"

"You haven't lost your interest in us, then, Mattie?"

"When I forget the prayers that Mrs. Wesden taught me, or the first words of yours that set me thinking that I might grow good, or all the kindness which everybody in this house has shown for me, then I shall lose that, Sir—not before!"

"You're an uncommon girl, Mattie."

"No, Sir."

"You show an uncommon phase—great gratitude for little kindnesses. I'm glad to see this interest in Harriet and my boy—perhaps they might do worse than make a match of it. But—but," suddenly returning to the subject which engrossed him, "hasn't it struck you—just a little, mind, nothing to speak of—that Harriet Wesden is a trifle vain?"

"Wouldn't you be proud of your good looks, if you had any?" was the sharp rejoinder.

"Um," coughed he, "I daresay I might."

"I should be always staring at myself in the glass if I had her complexion, her golden hair, her lovely blue eyes. I should be proud to think that my pretty face had made my happiness by bringing the thoughts of such a son as yours to me."

"Ah! I did not see it in that light," said he, tugging at his stock again, "and I—I daresay everything will turn out for the best. We will not dwell upon this any more, but let things take their course, and not spoil them by interference, or by talking about them, Mattie."

"Don't fear me," said Mattie, rising.

"I don't think it is our place," he added, associating himself with Mattie, to render his hints less personal, "to be curious about it, and seek to pry into what is going on in the hearts of these young people. Do you think now, Mattie, that she's inclined to be fond of—of my Sid?"

"I don't say she'd own it just now—but I think she is. Why shouldn't she be?"

"Ah!—why, indeed. There's not a boy like him in the whole parish."

"No, Sir."

"And Harriet Wesden will be a lucky girl."

"Ah! that she will!"

"And—and now good night, Mattie, and the less we repeat of this gossip the better."

"Certainly—things had better take their course without *our* interference."

"Yes," was the dry answer.

Mattie seized her tray, and prepared to depart. At the door, with her burden *en avance* she paused, went back to the table, replaced her tray, and returned to Mr. Hinchford's side.

"Something happened to-night! The dear girl has been disturbed—I hope Mr. Sidney has not been in a hurry, and——"

"Hush! I don't think he's asleep. Good night—good night."

"When *she* was a year younger, it was hard work to keep back what was in her heart from me; but she's growing older in her ways, and better able to understand that I'm only a poor servant, after all. I don't complain," said Mattie, "she's always kind and good to me, but she's my mistress's daughter, rather than the sister or something like the sister that used to be. And I do so like to know everything, Sir!"

"So it seems," remarked Mr. Hinchford.

"Everything that concerns her, I mean—because I might be of help when she least expected it. And so Mr. Sidney has told her all about it to-night?"

"I never said so," cried the embarrassed old gentleman.

"Well, I only guess at it," answered Mattie; "I shall soon come to the rights of it, if I keep a good look out."

She caught up her tray again and marched to the door to ponder anew. Mr. Hinchford writhed on his chair—would this loquacious diminutive help never go down stairs and leave him in peace? She asked no more questions, however.

"And to think that what I fancied would happen is all coming round like a story-book, just as I hoped it would be for her sake—for his sake—years and years ago! How nicely things come round, Sir, don't they?"

"Don't they!" he re-echoed.

Mattie departed, and the old gentleman blew at invisibility in the air once more.

"How that girl does talk!—it is her one fault—loquacity. If she can only find a listener, she's happy. And yet, when I come to consider it, that girl's always happy—for she's thankful and content. And things are coming nicely round, she says—well, I hope so!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SIDNEY STATES HIS INTENTIONS.

Mr. Wesden, if not the first person up in the house, was at least the first person who superintended business in the morning. For years that little shop had been opened punctually at six A.M. When the boy had not arrived to take down the shutters, Mr. Wesden lowered them himself. Tradesfolk over the way, early mechanics sallying forth to work from the back streets adjacent, the policeman on duty, the milkboy, and the woman with the water-cresses, knew when it was six o'clock in Great Suffolk Street, by the opening of Mr. Wesden's shop.

Mr. Wesden prided himself upon this punctuality, and not even to Mattie would he intrust the duties of commencing the labours of the day, despite the inflexibility of his back after a night's "*rest*."

Sidney Hinchford, who knew Mr. Wesden's habits, therefore found no difficulty in meeting with that gentleman at five minutes past the early hour mentioned.

"Good morning, Mr. Wesden."

"Good morning, Sidney."

Mr. Wesden was sitting behind his counter, in business position, ready for customers; the morning papers had not come in from the agent; he had given up of late years fetching them from the office himself, and there was not much to distract him from full attention to all that Sidney had to communicate.

"I thought I should find you handy for a serious bit of talk, Sir."

Mr. Wesden looked at him, and his face assumed a degree of extra gravity. Sidney Hinchford had got into debt with his tailor, and wished to borrow a few pounds "on the quiet."

"I suppose Harriet told you last night what happened?"

"Not all that happened, I fancy."

"Then she waited for me, possibly," he said, a little taken aback, nevertheless, "or told her mother. Well, you see, to make a long story short, Mr. Wesden, I have taken the liberty of falling in love with your daughter, as was natural and to be expected, and I have come down early this morning to tell you plainly that that's the state of my feelings, and that if you have anything to say against it or me you can clap on the extinguisher, and no one a bit the wiser."

Mr. Wesden was a man who never showed his surprise by anything more than an intenser stare than usual; he sat looking stolidly at Sidney Hinchford, who leaned over the counter with flushed cheeks and earnest eyes, surveying him through his glasses.

Still Mr. Wesden was surprised—in fact, very much astonished. Only a year or two ago, and the tall young man before him was a little boy fresh from school, and a source of trouble to him when he got near the tinsel drawer, and Skelt's Scenes and Characters—now he was talking of love matters.

"You're the first customer this morning, Sidney, and you've asked for a rum article," he said, bluntly.

"Which you'll not refuse me, I hope, Sir—which you'll give me a chance of obtaining, at all events."

"What does Harriet say?"

"I've—I've only just said a few words to her, more than I ought to have said, perhaps, before I know her feelings towards me, or what your wishes were, Sir."

Sidney, very humble and deferential to paterfamilias, after taking the case in his own hands, like all young hypocrites who have this terrible ordeal to pass, and are doubtful of the upshot.

Mr. Wesden listened and stared, clean over Sidney's head, rather than at him. Had he not had a long experience of the stationer's ways he would have augured ill for his prospects from the stolidity with which his news was received; but Mr. Wesden was always a grave and reserved man, and his immobile features did not alarm the young suitor.

"Well, and what's to keep her and you—*my money?*"

"Not a farthing of it, Sir, by your good leave," said Sidney, proudly; "I wish to work on and wait for her. I have every hope of attaining to a good position in my office; I think I see my way clearly; I won't ask you to let her marry me till I can show you a home of my own, and a little money in the bank, Sir."

"Why didn't you wait till then?" was the dry question.

"Why, because a fellow wants a hope to live on—permission from you to pay his addresses to Miss Harriet, and to ask her to give me a hope too."

"I see."

Mr. Wesden fidgeted about his top drawers, folded some papers, looked in his till, and then turned his little withered face to Sidney. The face had altered, was brighter, even wore a smile, and Sidney's heart leaped again.

"If you'd been like most young men, I should have said 'Not yet.' But you haven't crept about the bush, and you've dealt fair, and I'll promise all I can without tying the girl up too closely."

"Tying her up!"

"The home of your own hasn't turned up yet," shrewdly remarked

the stationer; "and though I believe that and the money will, we may as well wait for some signs of them. And——"

"Well, well."

"Don't you be in a hurry, young man; breath don't come so fast as it did, and I'm not used to long speeches."

"Take your time, Sir; I beg pardon."

"And Harriet's very young, and may see some one else to like better."

"I hope not, Sir."

"And *you* are very young, and may see some one else too."

"Oh! Mr. Wesden."

"Ah! it's shocking to think of, but these awful events do occur," said the old man, satirically; "and, besides, my old lady and I are ignorant people in one way, and mayn't suit you when you get bigger and prouder."

"Mr. Wesden, you'll not fancy that, I know."

"You'll have to think whether, when you are a great man, you'll be able to put up with the old lady and me coming to see our girl sometimes."

Sidney entered another protest—was prolific, even liberal in his invitations, which he issued on the spot.

"Then if it's not an engagement, or what I call downright keeping company just yet—say for another year, at least, I shan't turn my back upon you."

"Thank you, Sir; you are more than generous."

He leaned across the counter and shook hands with Mr. Wesden; the news-agent drove up in his pony-cart at the same moment, and directly afterwards had flung a heavy bundle of the "early mornings" upon the counter; the news-boy entered, and waited for orders for his first round; a little girl came in for a penny postage stamp, change for sixpence, and a piece of paper to wrap the lot in. Business was beginning in Great Suffolk Street, and Sidney Hinchford getting in the way. Sidney would have liked to add a little more, but Mr. Wesden stopped him.

"Harriet's been down this half hour," he said; "I suppose you know that."

"Indeed I did not, Sir," exclaimed Sidney, with a wild glance towards the parlour.

Harriet was there, busying herself with the breakfast cloth; a domestic picture, fair and glowing. He dashed into the parlour, and Harriet, prepared for him now, listened demurely, felt her heart plunging a little, but did not rebuke him with any words similar to those of yesternight. His despairing look of that period had kept her restless all night; she could not bear to know that others were unhappy, and she fancied that she should soon learn to love him, if she did not love him already, for his manliness and frankness. So she listened, and Sidney detailed his interview with her father, and

ner father's wish that it should not be considered an engagement between them until at least another year had passed.

"We are to go on just the same as if nothing had happened, but —but I wish you to look forward to the end of that year like myself, to have hope in me and my efforts, and to give me hopes of you."

"Am I worth hoping for, Sidney?" was the rejoinder; "you don't know half the foolishness of which I have been guilty—what a weak, frivolous, romantic girl I have been."

She thought of her Brighton romance, opened the book, and then shut it hastily again. It was a story he had no right to know yet, and she had not the courage to tell him just then—it belonged wholly to the past, so rake the dead leaves over it, and let it rest again!

Let it rest, then; there was no engagement. Both were free to change their minds before the year was out in which the strength of their love would be put to the test. For that year nothing more than friends, she thought, or a something more than friends, and less than lovers.

The half bargain was concluded, and Sidney went on his way rejoicing. There was rejoicing in the hearts of all in that house for a while. Mrs. Wesden cried over her girl as though she was going away to-morrow, but talked as if it were a settled engagement, and was glad that Sidney Hinchford was to be her son-in-law some day. Mr. Hinchford and Mr. Wesden smoked their pipes together that evening, and talked about it in short disjointed sentences, amidst which Mr. Hinchford learned that Mr. Wesden would retire from business before the year's probation had expired, leaving Mattie, possibly, in charge. Mattie and Ann Packet, in the lower regions, dwelt upon the same subject, free debatable ground, which no one cared to hem round by restrictions.

Late in the evening, Mattie stole up to Harriet's bed-room, and knocked softly at the panels of the door.

"May I come in?" she asked.

"To be sure, Mattie."

"I thought that you would be sitting here, thinking of it."

"Thinking of what, Mattie?"

"Ah! you don't tell me anything now; but I can guess; and Mr. Sidney did not sit in the parlour all the evening for nothing!"

"No, Mattie; but it's not a downright engagement yet. I'm to try if I can like Sidney first."

"That's the best way; didn't I say that this would happen some day, Miss Harriet?"

"But it hasn't happened yet."

"Ah! but it will; I see it all now as plain as a book. I said only last night that things were coming round nicely for us all. And they are—they are!"

Harriet began to cry, and to beg Mattie to desist. For an instant the sanguine assertion sounded like a vain prophecy, and jarred strangely on her nerves, bringing forth tears and heavy sobs, and a fear of that future which stretched forth radiantly beyond to Mattie's vision. After all, Harriet was but a girl, and had not thought very deeply of all that the contract implied between Sidney and herself. And after all, *were* things coming round nicely?—or was the red glow in the sky lurid and threatening to her, and more than her?

This is scarcely a quiet story, and we have only finished our second book. What does the astute novel-reader think?

END OF BOOK THE SECOND.

BOOK III.

UNDER SUSPICION.

CHAPTER I.

AN OLD FRIEND.

Mr. Wesden retired from business. After thirty or forty years' application to the arduous task of "keeping house and home together," after much hesitation as to whether it were safe and practicable and he could afford it; after a struggle with his old habits of shopkeeping, and a deliberate survey of his position from all points of the compass, he migrated from Great Suffolk Street, and settled down in what he considered country—a back street in the Camberwell New Road, commanding views of a cabbage-field, a public-house, and another back street in course of formation by an enterprising builder.

This was country enough for Mr. Wesden; and handy for town, and Great Suffolk Street. For he had scarcely retired from business, merely withdrawn himself from the direct management, the sales over the counter, and the worry of the news-boys. The name of Wesden was still over the door, and Mattie remained general manager at the old shop, which had been her refuge from the world in the hard times of her girlhood.

Mr. and Mrs. Wesden then considered themselves in the country. They had humble notions, and a little contented them. There was a back garden with a grass plot, a gravel walk, two rows of box edging, and a few flower beds; surely that was country enough for anybody,

they thought! Then it was quite a mansion of a house—six rooms, exclusive of kitchen; and, thanks more to Harriet's taste than her parents', was neatly and prettily furnished.

It was a change from Great Suffolk Street. Harriet Wesden had been brought up with lady-like notions, and had never taken to the shop; it was pleasant to live in a private house, practise her piano, assist her mother in the gardening, and have a young man come courting her "once or twice a week!" Mr. Wesden, with habits more formed for shop life, had to struggle hard before he could accustom himself to the novelty of his position; in his heart he never felt thoroughly at home, and was always glad of an excuse to walk over to Great Suffolk Street. He could not sit on the new chairs all day, and stare at the roses on the carpet; there was nothing much to see out of window, save the postman, pot-boy, grocer's boy, and butcher, at regular intervals; gardening did not agree with his back, and it was hard work to get through the day, unless he went for a walk with the old lady.

The old lady aforesaid had taken quite a new lease of life; absence from the close neighbourhood of Suffolk Street had given her back some of her old strength; for twenty years she had solaced herself with the thought of "retiring"—the one ambition of a tradesman's wife—and now it had come, and she was all the better for the change. She made such good use of her limbs at intervals, became so absorbed in training Sweet Williams, and picking the snails off the white lilies, brightened up so much in that small suburban retreat that the old gentleman—always be it remembered of a suspicious turn—doubted in his own mind if Mrs. W. had not been "shamming Abraham" in Great Suffolk Street.

Harriet was not nineteen years of age yet, and business had not been left in Mattie's charge three months, when Mr. Wesden's character began to mould itself afresh. The change which had done mother and daughter good, altered Mr. Wesden for the worse. He became irritable, at times a little despondent; nothing to do began seriously to affect his temper. This is no common result in men who have been in harness all their lives. Steady, energetic shopkeepers, whose lives have been one bustle for a quarter of a century and upwards, find retiring from business not so fine a thing as it looked from the distance, when they were in debt to the wholesale purveyors.

Mr. Wesden did not like it; if the truth must be spoken, though he kept it to himself, for appearances' sake, he absolutely hated it. He was not intended for a gentleman, and he could *not* waste time—it made his head ache, and gave him the heart-burn. If it had not been for the shop in Great Suffolk Street he would have gone melancholy mad, or taken to drinking; that shop was his safety valve, and he was only his old self when he was back in it, pottering over the stock.

Unfortunately his *new* self was never more highly developed than when he had returned to Camberwell, and woe to the beggar or the brass band that halted before his gates and worried him.

Meanwhile, the shop in Great Suffolk Street continued to do its steady and safe business. Mattie was not far from eighteen years of age, proud of her position of trust, the quickest and best of shop-keepers. On the first floor still resided Mr. Hinchford and his son; the place was handy for office yet, and they were biding their time to launch forth, and assert their true position in society. The rent wa moderate, and Sidney was trying hard to save money out of h salary; there were incentives to save, and at times he was even trifle too economical for his father's tastes. Still he erred on th right side; his father was becoming weaker, and his father's memor was not what it had been; his employers had not spoken of th partnership lately, and there might be rainy days ahead, which it was policy to prepare for; in a world of changes, who could tell what might happen?

Mattie found it dull at first after the Wesdens' departure; the place seemed full of echoes, and one bright face at least was hard to lose. But the face came often to light up the old shop again, and on alternate Sundays she went to dine at the fine house at Camberwell, leaving Ann Packet in charge of the establishment.

Still, she was soon "at home;" she was a dependant, and must expect changes; she was a girl who always made the best of everything. There was no time for her to regret the alterations; she was born for work, and there was plenty to do in Mr. Wesden's business, not to mention a watch upon Ann Packet at times, who, when "afflicted," was rather remiss in her attention upon the lodgers.

Life was not monotonous with her, for she took an interest in her work; and if it had been, there were many gleams of sunshine athwart it; those who knew her best loved her, and had confidence in her. Many in Suffolk Street thought there wasn't such a young woman in the world; a butcher over the way—a young man beginning business for himself, thought that it would be a "good spec" to have such a young woman behind his counter attending to the customers. Those who knew her history, and there were many in Suffolk Street who remembered her antecedents, wondered at her progress: all was well until the autumn set in, and then the tide turned in the affairs of Mattie, and on those good friends whom Mattie loved.

One afternoon in September, Mattie was busy in the shop as usual—she kept to the shop all day, and never adopted the plan of hiding away from customers in the back parlour—when a woman with a large basket, a key on her little finger, a bonnet half off her head, disclosing a broad, sallow, wrinkled face, came shuffling into the shop.

Mattie looked at her across the counter, and waited for orders,

looked till her heart began beating unpleasantly fast. Back from the land benighted came a rush of old memories at the sight of that dirty, slip-shod woman, whom she had hoped never to see again.

"And so you recollects me, Mattie, arter all these years?"

"I—I think that I have seen you before."

"*I* should think you just had, once or twice. And so you're minding this shop for the Wesdens, whose turned gentlefolks?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well," putting her basket on the counter, and taking the one chair that was placed for the convenience of customers, "wonders will never cease. To think that you should find a place like this, and should have stuck to it so long, and never gone trapesing about the streets again."

"Can I serve you with anything?" asked Mattie.

"No, you can't. I never deal here."

"Then what do you want?"

"Ah! that's another wonder which won't cease either, my dear," said the old woman, assuming an insinuative manner, "and a bigger wonder than the tother one."

"I don't want to hear it. I don't want anything to say to you. You must go out of the shop, Mrs. Watts."

"Don't be afeard of me, my love; the Lord knows I haven't been a trouble to you, though I've lived within a stone's throw, and could have dropped in here at any moment. But no, I says, let her keep to her fine stuck-up people if she likes, and forget her oldest and best friends for 'em, and do her wust, it's not the likes of me or mine who'll poke our noses into her affairs. No, I says, let her keep a lady, and wear brown meriner dresses, and smart black aprons, and white collars and cuffs, for me!"

Mrs. Watts had verged into the acrimonious vein, taken stock of Mattie's general appearance at that juncture, and introduced it into her conversation with an ease and fluency that was remarkable.

Mattie stood watching her. This was the evil genius of her early life, and there was danger in her very presence. It was not safe to take her eyes from her.

"What do you want?" she asked again.

"It's somethin' partickler—shall we come into the parler?"

"Oh! no."

"I'm not well dressed enuf, I spose?—I'm not fit society for sich a nice young gal, I spose?—I'm to be turned off as if I was a beggar, instead of the woman of property which I am, I spose?"

"What do you want?" repeated Mattie.

"And I was your poor mother's friend, and trusted her when nobody else would, and gave her a bed to die on comforbly

when there wasn't a mag to be made out of her. And I was your friend, though that's something to turn your nose up at, ain't it?"

"You were kind in your way, perhaps,—I cannot say, I don't know; I don't wish to remember the past any more. Will you tell me what you want, or go away?"

"And you won't come into the parler?"

"No."

"It's the curiest story as you ever did hear. There's been a man asking arter you down our court, and asking arter me, and finding me out at last, and nearly coming to a bargain with me, when, cus my greediness, I lost him."

"Asking after me?"

"Ah! you may well open those black eyes of yourn—he made me stare, I can tell you. He walks one day into my house, as if it belonged to him, and says, 'Are you Mrs. Watts?' 'Yes,' I says. 'Do you remember Mrs. Gray?' he says. 'Not by name,' I says. 'She was a tramp,' he says, 'and died here.' 'Oh!' I says, 'if it's her you mean, whose name I never knowed or cared about, died here, she did.' 'And the child?' he says. 'Mattie you mean,' I says. 'Ah! Mattie,' he says. And then I says, thinking it was a dodge, my dear, for the perlice are up to all manner of tricks, and you mightn't have been going on the square, and been wanted, then I says, 'And will you obleege me with your reasons for all these questions of a 'spectable and hard-working woman?' I says. 'My name's Gray,' he says, 'and I'm Mattie's father.'"

"Is this true?—oh! is it really true?"

"Hopemaydropdead, my dear, if it isn't," Mrs. Watts remarked, running her words into each other in the volubility of her protestation; "hopemayneverstiragainfromhere, if 'tisn't, *Miss Gray!* 'Mattie's father!' I says. 'Yes,' he says; 'is that so very wonderful?' And I says, 'Yes it is, arter all this time ago.' And then he asks all manner of questions, which I didn't see the good of answering, and so was werry ignorant, my dear, until he said he'd give me a suverin to find you out. I says, 'I'd try for a five pun note, for you was a long way off, and it'd be a trouble to look arter you.' And he says, 'I'll take that trouble,' and I didn't see the pull of that, knowing he was anxious like, and fancying that five pounds wouldn't ruin him, so I held out. And then he looked at his watch, and said he'd come again, which he never did, as I'm an honest ooman."

"How long was this ago?"

"Two months."

"What kind of a man was he?"

"Oh! a little ugly bloke enough—not too well dressed. Your father won't turn out to be a duke or markis, if he ever turns up agin and brings me my five pounds."

"But you will not tell him where I live?—he may be a bad, crue man—my mother ran away from him because he treated her ill, I have heard her say. Oh! don't tell him where I live—I am happy and contented here."

Mrs. Watts brightened up with a new idea.

"You must make it a five pun note, then, instead of him, and I'll tell him I can't find yer when he comes back to take you home with him. You've saved money, I daresay, by this time, and five pounds ain't much to stand."

Mattie recovered her composure when it came to the money test; there was a motive for Mrs. Watts' appearance there, she thought; after all it was an idle story, a foolish scheme to extort money, which Mattie saw through now.

"I shall not give you any money—not five pence, Mrs. Watts."

"Leave it alone, then," was the sharp reply; "you can't leave here, and I'll bring him to you, if he ever comes agin. I didn't come to get money out of yer, but to keep my eye upon you for your father's sake. And you'll never take a step away from this place, right or left, but what I'll know it—there's too many on us about here for you to steal away."

"I do not intend to steal away," cried Mattie.

"And considerin' that I've come out of kindness, and to give you a piece of news, you might have said thankee for it—bad luck to you, Mattie Gray."

"Oh! bad luck will not come to me at your wish."

The old woman paused at the door, and shook her key at her.

"I never wished bad luck to any living soul, but what it came. Now think of that!"

She went out of the shop and along Great Suffolk Street at a smart pace—like a woman who had suddenly remembered something and started off in a hurry after it. Mattie was perplexed at the interview; doubtful if any truth had mixed itself with Mrs. Watts' statement, and at a loss to reconcile all that she had heard with fabrication. Even from Mrs. Watts' lips it sounded like truth; the woman seemed in earnest, her offer to take five pounds for her silence an impromptu thought, originated by Mattie's sudden fear.

"What can it mean?—what can it mean?" reiterated Mattie to herself; "was it unfair to doubt her?—she thought so, or she would not have wished me bad luck so evilly at the last."

She sat down behind the counter to reflect upon the strangeness of the incident, and was still revolving in her mind the facts or falsities connected with it, when Ann Packet burst from the parlour door into the shop, with eyes distended.

"Have you been up stairs, Mattie?"

"Up stairs, Ann!—no."

"Have you been asleep?"

"No."

"Oh, lor!—quite sure—not a moment!"

"No—no—what has happened?"

"Somebody's been up stairs into all the rooms, into yourn, too, where the money's put for Mr. Wesden—and—and broken open the drawer."

"And the cash box that I keep there?"

"Open, and EMPTY!"

Mattie dropped again into the chair from which she had risen at the appearance of Ann Packet, and struggled with a sense of faintness which came over her. The bad luck that Mrs. Watts had wished had soon stolen on its way towards her.

CHAPTER II.

STRANGE VISITORS TO GREAT SUFFOLK STREET.

MATTIE guessed the plan by which the robbery had been effected and at which Mrs. Watts had connived. Her attention had been distracted by the story that had been fabricated for the purpose, and then the accomplice, on his hands and knees, had stolen snake-like towards the door opening on the stairs, and made short work with everything of value to be found in the upper floors. What was to be done?—what would Mr. Wesden say, he who had never had a robbery committed on his premises during all the long years of his business life, thanks to his carefulness and watchfulness? What would he think of her? Would he believe that she had paid common attention to the shop he had left in trust to her, to be robbed in the broad noonday? What should she do? wait till the shop was closed and then set forth for Camberwell with the bad news, or start at once, leaving Ann Packet in charge, or wait till Mr. Hinchford came home, and ask him to be the mediator?

Whilst revolving these plans of action in her mind, the proprietor of the establishment, wearied of his country retirement, walked into the shop.

"Oh! Sir, something has happened very dreadful!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Wesden began to stare over her head at this salutation.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Some one has been up stairs this afternoon, broken open the drawers, and the cash box, and taken the money, eight pounds, nine shillings and sixpence, Sir."

Mr. Wesden sat down in the chair formerly occupied by Mrs. Watts and tried to arrange his ideas; he stared over Mattie's head harder than ever; he held his own head between his hands, taking off his hat especially for that purpose, and placing it on the counter.

"Money taken out of *this* house?"

"Yes."

"At *this* time of day—where were you, Mattie?"

"In the shop, sitting here, I believe."

"Then they came in at the back, I suppose?"

"No, in the front, whilst Mrs. Watts was talking to me."

"What Mrs. Watts?—not the woman——"

"Yes, yes, the woman who would have tempted me to evil, years ago; she came into the shop this afternoon, and said that my father—as if I'd ever had one, Sir!—had been inquiring for me in Kent Street."

"This is a curious story," muttered Mr. Wesden.

He put on his hat and went up stairs; it was half an hour, or an hour before he reappeared, looking very grave and stern.

"They didn't come in at the back of the house—I can't make it out—eight pounds nine and sixpence is a heavy loss—I'll speak to the policeman."

Mr. Wesden went in search of a policeman, and presently returned with two members of the official force, with whom he went up stairs, and with whom he remained some time. After a while Mr. Hinchford, senior, came home, heard the tidings, went into his room, and discovered a little money missing also, besides a watch-chain which he had left at home that day for security's sake, a link having snapped, and repairs being necessary.

Mr. Wesden and the policeman came down stairs and put many questions to Mattie and Ann Packet; finally the policeman departed, and Mr. Wesden very gravely walked about the shop, and paid but little attention to Mattie's expressions of regret.

"It's my carelessness, Sir, and I hope you'll let me make it up. I've been saving money, Sir, lately, thanks to you."

"Well, you can't say fairer than that, Mattie," he responded to this suggestion; "I'll think about that and let you know to-morrow."

He never let Mattie know his determination, or seemed inclined to dwell upon the subject again; the robbery became a forbidden topic, and drifted slowly away from the present. But it was an event that saddened Mattie; for she could read that Mr. Wesden had formed his own ideas of its occurrence, and she tortured herself

with the fear that he might suspect her. She had gained his confidence only to lose it; her antecedents were dark enough, and if he did not believe all that she had told him, then he must doubt if she were the proper person to manage the place in his absence.

He said nothing; he suggested no alteration; but he came more frequently to business; and he *was* altered in his manner towards her.

Mattie was right—he suspected her; he thought he kept his suspicions to himself, for amidst the new distrust rose ever before him the past struggles of the girl in her faithful service to him, and he was not an uncharitable man. But the police had seconded his doubts—the story was an unlikely one, Mattie had been a bad character, and, above all, Mrs. Watts, upon inquiry, had not lived in Kent Street or parts adjacent for the last three years. However, his better nature would not misjudge implicitly, although a shadow of distrust was between him and Mattie from that day forth. He said nothing to Harriet or his wife, but he seldom asked Mattie to his house at Camberwell now; he came more frequently for his money, and looked more closely after his stock; he had a habit of turning into the shop at unseasonable hours and taking her by surprise there.

Mattie bore with this for a while—for two or three months, perhaps, then her out-spoken nature faced Mr. Wesden one evening.

"You've got a bad thought in your head against me, Sir."

Thus taxed, Mr. Wesden answered in the negative. Looking at her fearless face, and her bright eyes that so steadily met his, he had not the heart or the courage to confess it.

"I'd rather go away than you should think that; go away and leave you all for ever. I know," she added, very sorrowfully and humbly, "that my past life isn't a fair prospect to look back upon, and that it stands between you and your trust in me at this time."

"No, Mattie."

"If you doubt me——"

"If I believed that you were not acting fairly by me, I should not have you here an hour," he said.

He was carried away by Mattie's earnestness; he forgot his new harshness, which he had inherited with his change of life; before him stood the girl who had nursed his wife through a long illness, and he could not believe in her ingratitude towards him. After that charge and refutation, Mattie and Mr. Wesden were on better terms with each other—the robbery, the visit of Mrs. Watts, appeared all part of a bad dream, difficult to shake off, but in the reality of which it was hard to believe. And yet it was all a terrible truth, too, and the story true or false, of Mrs. Watts, late of Kent Street, had left an impression on Mattie, deep and ineffaceable; she could almost believe that from the shadowy past some stranger, cruel and villainous would step forth to claim her.

Meantime the course of Sidney Hinchford's true love flowed on peacefully; he was happy enough now—with the hope of Harriet Wesden for a wife he became more energetic than ever in business; possibly even a young man less abrubt to his companions in office; for the tender passion softens tl e heart wonderfully. He was more kind and less brusque in his manner. To Mattie he had been always kind, but she fancied that even she could detect a different and more gentle way with him.

When he returned from Camberwell—Mr. Wesden always shut him out at early hours—he generally brought some message from Harriet to the old half-friend and *confidante*, and at times would loiter about the shop talking of Harriet to Mattie, and sure of her sympathy with all that he said and did.

On one of the latter occasions, about six in the evening, he remarked,

"When Harriet and I are grand enough to have a large house of our own—for we can't tell what may happen—I shall ask you to be our housekeeper, Mattie."

Mattie's face brightened up; it had been rather a sad face of late, and Sidney Hinchford had observed it and been puzzled at the reason. The story of the robbery had not affected him much.

"Oh! then I'll pray night and day for the big house, Mr. Sidney," she said with her usual readiness of reply.

"Why, Mattie, are you tired of shopkeeping?"

"At times I am," she answered. "I don't know why. I don't see how to get on and feel happy. It's rather lonely here."

"You dissatisfied, Mattie! Why, I have always regarded you as the very picture of content."

"I'm not dissatisfied exactly; don't tell any one that, or they'll think I'm ungrateful for all the kindness that has been shown me, and all the confidence that has been placed in me. You, Mr. Hinchford, must not think I'm ungrateful or discontented."

"Perhaps you're ambitious, Mattie," he said, jestingly, "now you've mastered all the lessons which I used to set you, and can read and write as well as most of us."

"I don't exactly understand the true meaning of ambition," said Mattie. "I'm no scholar, you know. Is it a wish to get on in the world?"

"Partly."

"I'm not ambitious. I wouldn't be a lady for the world. I would rather be of service to some one I love, than see those I love working and toiling for my sake. But then they must love me, and have faith in me, or I'm—I'm done for!"

Mattie had dropped, as was her habit when excited, into one of her old phrases; but its meaning was apparent, and Sidney Hinchford understood it.

"Something's on your mind, Mattie. Can I punch anybody's head for you?"

"No, thank you. But you can remember the promise about the housekeeper when you're a rich man."

Like Sidney's father, she accepted Sidney's coming greatness as a thing of course, concerning which no doubts need be entertained.

He laughed.

"It's a promise, mind. Good night, Mattie."

"Good night."

That night was to be marked by another variation of the day's monotony—by more than one. It was striking seven from St. George's Church, Southwark, when a stately carriage and pair dashed up Great Suffolk Street, and drew up at the stationer's door. A few moments afterwards a tall, white-haired old gentleman entered the shop leaning upon the arm of a good-looking young man, and advanced towards the counter.

The likeness of the elder man was so apparent to that of old Mr. Hinchford upstairs, that Mattie fancied it was he for an instant, until her rapid observation detected that the gentleman before her was much thinner, wore higher shirt collars, had a voluminous frill to his shirt, and a double gold eye-glass in his hand.

"Thank you, that will do. I won't trouble you any further."

"Shall I wait here?"

"No, my boy—don't let me keep you from your club engagements. If you are behind time take the carriage."

"No, no—not so selfish as that, Sir. Good night."

"Good night."

The good-looking young man did not wait to see the result of his father's mission; he glanced for a moment at Mattie, and then took his departure, leaving the stately old gentleman confronting her at the counter.

"This is Mr. Wesden's, stationer, I believe?" he asked, surveying Mattie through his glasses.

"Yes, Sir."

"A Mr. Hinchford lives here?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Is he within?"

"Not the old gentleman, I believe, Sir."

"As I have not come hither to base my hopes of an interview on the belief of a black-eyed shop-girl, will you be kind enough to inquire?"

The old gentleman sat down and loosened the guilt clasp of a long cloak which he wore—an old-fashioned, oddly cut black cloak, with a cape to it.

Mattie forgot the likeness which this gentleman bore to the lodger upstairs; lost her impression of the carriage at the door, and thought of Mrs. Watts and the hundred tricks of London thieves. She began thumping with her heels on the floor, until she

quite shook up the old gentleman on the other side of the counter.

"What's that for, my child?" he asked.

"That'll bring up the servant—I never leave the shop."

The gentleman closed his glasses, and rapped upon the counter with them in rather an amused manner.

"By Jupiter Tonans, that's amusing! She thinks I'm going to make off with the stationery," he said, more to himself than Mattie.

Ann Packet, round eyed and wondering as usual, looked over the parlour blind. Mattie beckoned to her, and she opened the parlour door.

"Run up and tell Mr. Sidney that a gentleman wishes to see his father. Is he to wait or to call again?"

"I think I might answer that question better myself—stay."

The slim old gentleman very slowly and deliberately searched for his card-case, produced it and drew forth a card.

"Present that to Mr. Sidney, and say that the bearer is desirous of an interview."

Ann Packet took the card in her great red hand, turned it over, looked from it to the owner, gave vent to an idiotic "Lor!" and then trudged up stairs with the card. Mattie and the old gentleman, meanwhile, continued to regard each other—the suspicions of the former not perfectly allayed yet.

Ann Packet returned, appearing by the staircase door this time.

"Mr. Sidney Hinchford will see you, Sir—if your business is of importance, he says."

The gentleman addressed compressed his lips—very thin lips they became on the instant—but deigned no reply. He rose from his chair and followed Ann through the door, up stairs towards Mr. Hinchford's room, leaving his hat on the counter, where he had very politely placed it upon entering the shop.

Mattie put it behind her, and then scowled down a lack-a-daisical footman, who was simpering at her between a *Family Herald* and a portrait of T. P. Cooke.

The stranger followed Ann Packet up stairs, and entered the room on the first floor, glancing sharply round him through his glasses, and taking a survey of everything which it contained on the instant. There was a fire burning in the grate that autumn night; the gas was lighted; the tea-things ready on the table; at a smaller table by the window, working by the light of a table-lamp adorned by a green shade, and with another green shade tied across his forehead by way of extra protection for the eyes he worked so mercilessly, sat Sidney Hinchford, the only occupant of the room.

Sidney rose, bowed slightly, pointed to a chair with the feather of his pen, then sat down again, and looked at his visitor from under the ugly shade, which cast his face into shadow.

The gentleman bowed also, and took the seat indicated, keeping his gold-rimmed glasses on his nose.

"You are my brother James's son, I presume?"

"The same, Sir."

"You are surprised to see me here?"

"Yes, Sir—now."

"Why now?" was the quick question that followed like the snap of a trigger.

"Years and years ago, when I was a lad, I fancied that you might visit here, and make an effort to bridge over an ugly gulf, Sir."

"Years and years ago, young man, I had too much upon my mind, and, it was just possible, more pride in my heart than to make the first advances."

"You were the richer man—and you had done the wrong."

"Wrong, Sir!" replied the other; "there was no wrong done that I am aware of. I was a man careful of my money, and your father was a man improvident with his. Was it wrong to object to an alliance?"

"I have but a dim knowledge of the story, Sir. My father does not care to dwell upon it."

"I will tell it you."

The old gentleman drew his chair nearer to Sidney; the young man held up his hand.

"Pardon me, but I have no desire to hear it. Were I to press my father, I could learn it from his own lips. Please state the object of your coming hither."

"To make the first advances in the latter days that have come to him and me," he said; "can I say more? To help him if he be in distress—and to assist his son if he find the world hard to cope with. It is a romantic appearance, a romantic penitence if you will, for not allowing your father to spend my money as well as his own," he added, with a slight curl of the lip, which turned Sidney suddenly against him; "but it is an effort to bridge over the gulf to which you have recently alluded."

"I fear my father will not thank you for the effort," was the cold reply; "and for the help which you would offer now, I can answer for his refusal."

"Ah! he was always a proud fellow, and blind to his own interest," was the quiet observation here; "his friends laughed at his pride, and traded in his weakness before you were born."

"He has one friend living who respects them now, Sir."

"His son, I presume?"

"His son, Sir."

"I am glad that his son is so high-spirited; but he will find that amiable feeling rather in the way of his advancement."

"No, Sir—I think not."

Mr. Hinchford regarded Sidney very closely; he did not appear put out by the young man's retorts, and he was pleased at the effect that his own satire had upon him.

"Well," he said at last, "I have not come to quarrel with my nephew—I am here as a peacemaker, and, lo! the son starts up with all the fathers's old obstinacies. Your name is Sidney, I believe."

"Yes, Sir."

"Sidney Hinchford, then," said he, "if you be a man of the world—which I fancy you are—you will not turn your back on your own interests for the sake of the grudge which my unforgiving brother may owe me. That's not the way of the world, unless it's the world of silly novel-writers and poets."

"Sir, this sudden interest in my father and myself is somewhat unaccountable."

"Granted," was the cool response.

"Still, let me for my father and myself thank you," said Sidney, with a graceful dignity that set well upon him, "thank you for this sudden offer, which I, for both, must unhesitatingly decline."

"Indeed!"

"We are not rich, you can see," Sidney said with a comprehensive sweep of his hand, "but we have managed to exist without getting into debt, and I believe that the worst struggle is over with us both."

"Upon what supposition do you base this theory?"

"No matter, Mr. Hinchford, my belief is strong, and I would not deprive myself of the pleasure of saying that I worked on with my father to the higher ground whithout the help of those rich relations who would at the eleventh hour have taken the credit to themselves."

"You are a remarkable young man."

"Sir, you are come too late here," said Sidney, with no small amount of energy; "we bear you no ill-will, but we will not have your help now. If you and yours forgot my father in his adversity, if you made no sign when he was troubled by my mother's death, if you held aloof when assistance and sympathy would have made amends for the old breach between you, if you turned your backs upon him and shut him from your thoughts then, now we repudiate your service, and prefer to work our way alone!"

"Well, well, be it so," said his uncle; "it is heroic, but it is bad policy, more especially in you, a young man who will have to fight hard for a competence. You will excuse this whim of mine."

"I have already thanked you for the good intention."

"I did not anticipate encountering so hard and dogmatic a disposition as your own, but I do not regret the visit."

Sidney looked at his watch, fidgeted with the feather of his pen, but made no remark to this.

"We will say it was a whim—you will please to inform your father that this was simply a whim of mine—the impulse of a moment, after an extra glass of port wine with my dessert."

"I will think so, if you wish it."

"You perceive that I am an old man—your father's senior by eight years—and old people *do* get whimsical and childish, when the iron in their nerves melts, by some unaccountable process, away from them. Possibly this is not the first time that it has struck me that my brother James and I might easily arrive at a better appreciation of each other's character, if we sat down quietly face to face, two old men as we have become. The sarcasm that wounded him, and the passionate impulse that irritated me, would have grown less with our white hairs, I think. I don't know for certain—I cannot answer for a man who always would take the wrong side of an argument, and stick to it. By Gad! how tightly he would stick to it!"

The old gentleman rapped his gold-headed cane on the floor, and indulged in a little sharp laugh, not unpleasant to hear. Sidney repressed a smile, and looked significantly at his watch again.

"You wish me gone, young Sir," said his uncle.

"Candidly, I see no good result to arise from your stay. My father is of an excitable disposition, and I am sorry to say neither so strong nor so well as I could wish. I fear the shock would be too much for him."

"I will take the hint," he said, rising; "I hate scenes, and if there is likely to be a second edition of those covert reproaches with which you have favoured me, why, it is best to withdraw as gracefully as possible, under the circumstances. You will tell him that I have called?"

"Yes, Sir."

"You will tell him also—bear this in mind instead of sucking your pen, will you?—that if he owe me no ill-will, he will call on me next—that it is *his* turn! I never ask a man twice for anything—except for the money he may owe me," he added, dryly.

"I will deliver your message, Mr. Hinchford."

"Then I have the honour, Sir, to apologise for this intrusion, and to wish you a good evening."

He crossed the room and held out a thin white hand to Sidney, looking very strangely, very intently at him meanwhile. Sidney placed his own within it, almost instinctively, and the two Hinchfords shook hands.

They parted; Sidney thought that he had finally taken his departure, when the door opened, and he reappeared.

"Do you mind showing me a light?—it's a cork-screw staircase, leading to the bottomless pit, to all appearances."

Sidney seized the table-lamp, and proceeded to the top of the

stairs, which his uncle descended in a slow and gingerly manner. At the first landing he looked up, and said:

"That will do, thank you—remember, *his* turn next—good evening."

Sidney went back to the room, and shortly afterwards Mr. Hinchford, the great banker, the owner of princely estates in three counties, was whirled away westward in his carriage.

CHAPTER III.

SIDNEY'S SUGGESTION.

When Mr. Hinchford returned home, Sidney related the particulars of the strange visit that he had received; and from the effect which the news produced on his father, was grateful for the thought which had prompted him to request his uncle's departure. Sidney had noticed with sadness, lately, that his father was easily disturbed, easily affected, and it was satisfactory to know that it had been judicious on his part to advise his uncle's retirement.

Mr. Hinchford tugged at his stock, held his temples, passed his hands through his scanty hair, puffed and blowed, dropped his first cup of tea over his knees, and did not subside into a moderate state of calmness for at least a quarter of an hour after the story had been told.

"And so brother Geoffry turns up at last!—well, I thought he would."

Sidney looked with amazement at his father.

"He would have turned up years ago, I daresay, if it hadn't been for his wife—she and I never agreed; but old steady, quiet Geoffry, why, when we were boys, we were the best of friends."

"You certainly surprise me, father. Perhaps I have done wrong in persuading him to depart. But I always understood that it had been a desperate quarrel between you, and that you had almost taken an oath never to speak to him again."

"That's all true enough, and it was a desperate quarrel, and he was tight-fisted just then, and let me drift into bankruptcy, rather

than help me. It wasn't brotherly, and I'll never forgive him—never. How was the rascal looking, Sid?"

"Like a spare likeness of yourself, Sir."

"He's taller than I am by a good two inches. We used to cut notches in the sides of all the doors when we were boys; comparing notes, we called it. I suppose he's very much altered?"

"Well, never having seen him before, it is difficult to say. But I have no doubt that there's a difference in him since you met last."

"Let me see—it's five-and-twenty years ago, come next February. Twenty-five years to nurse a quarrel, and bear enmity in one's heart against him. What a time!"

"He was anxious to tell me the story of that quarrel, Sir, but I declined to listen to it."

"I hope you weren't rude."

"Oh! no, Sir."

"You have a most unpleasant habit of blurting out anything that comes uppermost. That's your great failing, Sid."

"I like to speak out, Sir."

"And after all, perhaps if we had spoken out less—he and I—we should not have been all these years at arm's length, and you might have been the better for that. There's no telling, things turn out so strangely. And it wasn't so much his refusal to lend me, his only brother, ten thousand pounds—ten drops of water to him—but the way in which he refused, the bitterness of his words, the gall and wormwood instead of brotherly sympathy. I was half mad with my losses, and he stung me with his cool and insolent taunts, and cast me off to beggary—Sid, would you forgive that?"

Mr. Hinchford had realised the scene again; through the mists of five-and-twenty years it shone forth vividly; his cheek flushed, and his hand smote the table heavily, and made the tea things jump again.

Sidney cooled him by a few words.

"He has been cautious with his money, and you might have shown signs of being reckless with yours, at that time. Possibly you both were heated, and said more than you intended. It don't appear to me to have been a very serious affair, after all."

"Did he ever seek me out again, or care whether I was alive or dead, until to-day?—was that kind?"

"Did you ever seek *him* out?"

"He was the rich man, and I the poor, Sid."

"Ah! that makes a difference!"

"What would you have done?" he asked, anxiously.

"Kept away; not because it was right or politic, but because I inherit my father's pride."

"It's an odd legacy, Sid," remarked the father, mournfully.

"I told him to-night we did not care about his patronage, and

could work our way in the world—that at so late an hour, when the worst was over, we would prefer to thank ourselves for the result. I don't say that I was right, father," he added; "but there was a satisfaction in saying so, and in showing that we did not jump at any favour he might think it friendly to concede."

"You're a brave lad," remarked the father, relapsing into thought again; "and perhaps it is as well to show we don't care for him. He talked about my turn next, you say?"

"Yes."

"That means, that he'll never come here again, or make another effort to be friends. Oh! he's as hard as iron when he says a thing, Sid."

"Shall I tell you what I have thought, Sir?—it goes against the foolish oath you took, but I think you'll be forgiven for it."

"What have you thought?" he asked with eagerness.

"That it shall be our turn some day—some early day, I hope—to visit him, and say:—'We are in a good position in life, and above all help; shall we be friends again?'"

"To walk into his counting-house, and surprise him?" cried the father; "for me to say:—'I owe all to my son's energy and cleverness, and can afford to face you, without being suspected of wanting your money.' Well, we ought to bear and forbear; I don't think it would be so very hard to make it up with him!"

It was a subject that discomposed Mr. Hinchford—that kept him restless and disturbed. His son detected this, and brushed all the papers into a heap, thrust them into the recesses of his desk, and began hunting about for the backgammon-board. The past had been ever a subject kept in the back ground, and of late years his father had not seemed capable of hearing any news, good or bad, with a fair semblance of composure. The change in him had been a matter of regret with Sidney; far off in the distance, perhaps, there might loom a great trouble for him—he almost fancied so at times. Meanwhile, there were troubles nearer than that fancied one—man is born unto them, as the sparks fly upwards.

CHAPTER IV.

PERPLEXITY.

Harriet Wesden had spoken more than once to Mattie of the Eveleighs, a family which plays no part in these pages, although, from Harriet's knowledge of it, every after page of this story will be influenced. A Miss Eveleigh, an only daughter, and a spoiled one, had been a schoolfellow of Harriet's; an intimacy had existed between them in the old days, and when school days were ended for good, a correspondence was kept up, which resulted, eventually, in flying visits to each other's houses—the house in Camberwell, and Miss Eveleigh's residence at New Cross.

Harriet, during the last week or two, had been spending her time at New Cross with the Eveleighs, much to the desolateness of the Camberwell domicile, and the dulness of Master Sidney Hinchford. But the visit was at an end on the morning of the day alluded to in our last chapter, and had it not been for his father's excitability, Sidney, who had mapped his plans out, would have abandoned the backgammon-board and a-wooing gone.

It was as well that he did not, for Harriet Wesden at half-past seven in the evening entered the stationer's shop, and surprised Mattie by her late visit.

"Good gracious!" was Mattie's truly feminine ejaculation, "who would have thought of seeing you to-night? How well you are looking—how glad I am that you have come back—what a colour you have got!"

"Have I?" she said; "ah! it's the sharp frost that's in the streets to-night. Let me deliver father's message, and hurry back before he gets fidgety about me."

Harriet Wesden and Mattie went into the parlour, Mattie taking up her position by the door, so as to command the approach from the street, Harriet sitting by the fire with her head against the chimney-piece. The message was delivered, sundry little account-books were wanted at once, and Harriet was to take them back with her; Mattie had to find them in the shop, and make them up into a little parcel for our heroine.

When she returned, Harriet was in the same position, staring very intently at the fire.

"Is anything the matter?" asked our heroine.

"Oh! no—what should be the matter, dear?"

"You're very thoughtful, and it's not exactly your look, Miss Harriet."

"Fancies again, Mattie," remarked Harriet; "I'm only a little tired, having walked from Camberwell."

"I hope you'll not walk back—it's getting late. Unless," she added, archly, "Mr. Sidney up stairs is to see you safely home. That must be one of the nicest parts of courtship, to go arm-in-arm together about the streets—to feel yourself safe with *him* at your side."

Harriet's thoughtful demeanour vanished; she gave a merry laugh at the gravity with which Mattie delivered this statement, taunted Mattie with having thoughts of a lover running in her head, darted from that subject to the pleasant fortnight she had been spending with the Eveleighs at New Cross, detailed the particulars of her visit, the people to whom she had been introduced, and lively little incidents connected with them—finally caught up her parcel and bade Mattie good night.

"Ah! you'll wait till I call down Mr. Sidney, I'm sure."

"He'll think that I have called for him. No, I'm going home alone to-night."

"Why, what will he say?"

"Tell him that I was in a hurry, going home by omnibus to save time, and appease father's nervousness about me. I will not have any danglers in my train to-night. I'm in a bad temper—nervous, irritable and excitable—I shall only offend him."

"Then something has——"

"Good night, Mattie—oh! I had nearly forgotten to ask you to dine with us on Sunday; you'll be sure to come early?"

"Who told you to say that?"

"Why, my father, to be sure."

"I'm glad of it—I'm glad he thinks better of me," Mattie cried; "oh! Miss Harriet, you don't know how miserable I have been in my heart, lest he—lest he has thought differently of me lately!"

"More fancies! I have always said that they were fancies, Mattie."

"Ah! I guess pretty near to the truth sometimes."

"And tease yourself with a false idea more often—why, you will imagine that *I* shall think differently of you presently."

"No—I don't think you will."

"Never, Mattie."

"God bless you for that!—if ever I'm in trouble I shall look to you to defend me."

"And in my trouble, Mattie?" was the half-laughing rejoinder.

"I'll think of you only, fight for you against all your enemies—die for you, if it will do any good. Oh! Miss Harriet, you are growing up a lady very far above me, getting out of my reach like.

you won't forget the little girl you were kind to, and shut her wholly from your heart?"

Harriet Wesden was touched; ever a sensitive girl, the sight of another's sorrow struck home. She went back a step or two into the parlour.

"This isn't like the old Mattie," she said, "the Mattie who always looked at the brightest side of life, and made the best of every difficulty. Is that silly affair of the robbery still preying on your mind?"

"On your father's, perhaps—not on mine."

"Then I'll fight the battle for you to begin with—if there be really one doubt in my father's heart, I'll charge it from it's hiding-place to-night. Perhaps I have been wrapped up too much lately in my own selfish thoughts when I might have helped you, Mattie. Will you forgive me?"

She stooped and kissed Mattie, whose arms closed round her for a minute with a loving clasp.

"I'm better now," said Mattie; "it was fancy, perhaps, a fancy that you, too, were going further away from me—perhaps thinking ill of me. For you were cold and distant when you came here first to-night."

"No, no."

"Well, that was my fancy, too, it's very likely. I'll say good night now, for it's getting late."

"Good night, then."

At the door she paused and returned.

"Mattie, put on your bonnet and come with me to the end of the street where the omnibus passes. I'm nervous to-night—I don't care to walk alone about these streets again."

"Let me call Mr. Sid——"

"No, no; you—not him!" she interrupted.

"I never leave the shop, Miss Harriet; it's my trust, and your father would not like it. Shall Ann——"

"Oh! it does not matter much! you have only made me nervous. I'm very wrong to seek to take you from the business, and father so particular and fidgety. I daresay no one will fly away with me. Good night, my dear."

She went away with a bright smile at her own nervousness. That was the last gleam of brightness there for a while!

After that there settled on her face a confused expression, often a sad, always a thoughtful one, with a long look ahead, as it were, from the depths of her blue eyes. From that night there was a change in her; Mattie, quick of observation, was the first to detect it. It was a face of trouble, and Mattie, seeing it now and then, could note the shadows deepen. Sidney observed it next, detected, with a lover's jealous scrutiny, a difference in her manner towards him, a something new which was colder and less friendly, and yet

not demonstrative enough for him to murmur against, even if his half engagement had permitted him.

He asked her once if he had offended her, and she replied in the negative, and was kinder towards him for that night; but the reserve, indifference, coldness, or whatever it was, came back, and perplexed Sidney Hinchford more than he cared to own. The year of his novitiate was approaching to an end, and he thought that he could afford to wait till then; she was not tiring of him and his attentions, he had too good an opinion of himself to believe that; at times he solaced himself with the idea that she was reflecting on the gravity of the next step, that formal engagement to be married in the future to him.

Mattie and Sidney were both observers of some power, for after all they saw through the bright side—the forced side—of her. For the father and mother was reserved Harriet Wesden with her mask off.

Fathers and mothers are strangely blind to the causes of their daughters' ailments; this humble pair formed no exception to the rule. They were perplexed with her fits of brooding, her forced efforts to rally when taxed with them, her pallor, loss of appetite, red eyes and restless looks in the morning. Mr. Wesden, a suspicious man to the world in general, was the most trustful and simple as regarded his daughter; he did not know the depth of his love for her until she began to look ill, and then he almost worried her into a real illness by his suggestions and anxiety.

Mr. and Mrs. Wesden had many secret confabulations concerning the change in Harriet; pottering over a hundred fusty ideas, with never a thought as to the true one.

Was Camberwell disagreeing with her?—was the house damp, or her room badly situated?—had not the dear girl change enough, society enough?—what *was* the matter? Mr. Wesden set it down for "a low way"—an unaccountable complaint from which people suffer at times, and for which change of scene is good.

So he set to work studying the matter, originating small excursions for the day, submitting her to the healthy excitement of the winter course of lectures at the infant schools in the vicinity—lectures on artificial memory, on hydrostatics with experiments, on the poets with experiments also; and unaccountable ones they were—even once ventured into a box of the Surrey Theatre, and began to flatter himself and wife that at last Harriet was rapidly improving.

But Harriet Wesden was only learning rapidly to disguise that "something" which was perplexing her more and more with every day; learning to subdue her parents' anxiety, and sinking a little deeper all the new thoughts. But the whirl of events brought the secret uppermost, and betrayed her; she was forced to make a *confidante*, and she thought of Mattie, who had always loved her, and

stood her friend—Mattie, in whom she was sure was the only one she could trust.

The confidence was placed suddenly, and at a time when Mattie was scarcely prepared for it—Mattie, who yet, by some strange instinct, had been patiently waiting for it.

"I believe when that girl's in trouble she will come to me," Mattie thought, "for she knows I would do anything to serve her. Have I any one to love except her in the world?—is there any one who requires so much love to keep her, what I call, strong?"

Mattie had seen that Harriet Wesden was not strong—that she was tender-hearted, affectionate, and weak—that there were times when she might give way without a strong heart and a stout hand to assist her. She had been a weak, impulsive, passionate child—she had grown up a woman very different to Mattie, whose firmness, and even hardness, had made Harriet wonder more than once. And Mattie had often wondered at Harriet in her turn—at her vanity and romantic ideas, and made excuses for her, as we all do for those we love very dearly. She had even feared for her, until the half engagement with Sidney Hinchford had taken place, and then she had noticed that Harriet had become more staid and womanly, and was glad in her heart that it had happened thus.

Then finally and suddenly the last change swept over the surface of things—all the worse for our characters, perhaps, but infinitely better for our story, which takes a new lease of life from this page.

CHAPTER V.

MR. WESDEN TURNS ECCENTRIC.

The nights "drew in" more and more; and nearer and nearer with the shortest day approached the end of Sidney Hinchford's probation. Only a week or two between the final explanations of Sid's position—of his chances in the future, perhaps—everything very quiet and still at Suffolk Street and Camberwell—a deceptive calm before the storm that was brewing.

Harriet Wesden called more frequently at the stationer's shop; she was glad to escape from the long evenings at home, and the

watchful, ever anxious eyes of her father, and it was easy to frame an excuse to repair to Great Suffolk Street. Occasionally, Sidney Hinchford knew of her propinquity, and escorted her home—more often missed his chances of a *tête-à-tête*—three or four times, and greatly to his annoyance, crossed her in the journey, and reached Camberwell to spend the evening with a fidgety old man and his invalid spouse.

At this time it also happened that Sidney Hinchford fell into a dreamy absent way, for which there appeared no valid reasons, unless he had become alive to the doubts of Harriet's affection for him; an absence of mind, and even an irritability, which was disguised well enough from the father—before whom Sidney was more or less an actor—but which Mattie, ever on the watch, was quick as usual to detect.

She had become puzzled by Harriet's abstraction, and had looked for its reflex at once in Sidney Hinchford's face—finding it there, as she thought, after a while.

Mattie, left in the dark as to the truth, and every day becoming more of a young woman, who knew her place, and felt the distance between her master's daughter, her master's lodgers, and herself, could but draw her own conclusions, and frame a story from them.

Harriet and Sidney had quarrelled, and were keeping their quarrel a secret from the good folk at Camberwell; something had happened to cast a gloom on the way that Mattie thought would be ever bright and rosy, and each day they who should have been lovers seemed drifting further apart. She would have liked to play the part of mediator between them—to see them friends again—but her position held her back, and she had not the courage of a year ago. Those two young lovers had been the bright figures in her past—her life had somehow become blended with them, and she felt that her interest was of a cumulative character, and not likely to die out with her riper womanhood. She could not disassociate her mind away from them; at every turn in her career they were before her—they haunted her thoughts, and harassed her with their seeming inconsistencies of conduct. She did not understand them, for the clue to the inner life was absent from her; she could not see why Harriet was not a girl to love this young man with all her heart, as she was loved; she felt that there was an assimilation between the strength of one, and the weakness that needed support in the other; and that Sidney's earnest love should have more deeply impressed a heart naturally susceptible to anything that was honest and true.

And yet Harriet grew paler, and looked disturbed in mind, and Sidney Hinchford came home from business every day with a deeper shade of thought upon his face. He went less often to Camberwell also—she took notice of that—and stayed up late at night in the drawing-room, after having deluded his father into the belief that he should be only a few moments after him. All was mystery in Suffolk

Street, denser than the fogs which crept thither so often in the winter time.

Mr. Wesden, before retiring from business, had left strict orders with Mattie to be the last to go round the house, and see, in particular, to the gas burners, and the bolts which Ann Packet was continually leaving unfastened, and had once received warning for in Mr. Wesden's time. Mattie had injunctions to see to the drawing-room burners as well; to wait to an hour however late for the Hinchford exit.

This waiting up became a serious matter when Sidney Hinchford remained in the drawing-room till the small hours of the morning, and brooded over his papers, with which one table or another was invariably strewn. Mattie, a young woman of business, who did a fair's day's work, and rose early, ventured to remonstrate at last; it was intrenching beyond her province, but she made the plunge in a manner very nervous and new to her—in a manner that even confused herself a little.

He brought the remonstrance upon himself by coming down into the shop to hunt for some writing paper, which he intended to pay for in the morning, and was a little surprised to find Mattie sewing briskly in the back parlour.

"Up still, Mattie!—late hours for you," he said.

"Ah! and for you, too, Sir."

"Men can do with little rest, and I never leave one day's work for the next," said he, in that quick manner which had become habitual to him, and which appeared, to strangers, tinged with more abruptness than was really intended. "I was thinking of robbing your stationery drawer, Mattie, and lo, the thief is detected in the act."

"Oh! I hope you do not intend any more work to-night, Sir."

"Why not?" he asked, his eyes expressing a mild sort of surprise through his spectacles.

"I'm waiting to see the gas out in that table-lamp."

"Can't I see to it myself?"

"I thought so until I found the tap in the India-rubber pipe turned full on last night."

"Did you sit up last night, too?"

"Mr. Wesden has always wished that I should make sure everything was safe."

"But I'm busy just now; you musn't be a slave as well as myself."

"I hope you're not a slave, Mr. Sidney," said Mattie, assuming that half-familiar style of conversation which was natural to her with her two old friends, and which always escaped in spite of her, "or that you will not keep one much longer, for it's not improving your looks, I can tell you."

"*You* can tell me," said Sidney; "well, what's the matter with my looks, Mattie?"

Mattie looked steadily at him.

"You're paler than you used to be," she said after a while; "you're not like yourself; you've something on your mind."

Sidney frowned, rubbed his hair up the wrong way, after his father's fashion, cleared off suddenly, and then laughed.

"Who hasn't?" was his reply.

"There's nothing which can't easily be got over, or my name isn't Mattie," said our heroine, with great firmness.

She was full of her one reason for all this thought on his side, and the confusion and perplexity on Harriet's, and she delivered her hint emphatically.

"I don't despair of getting over most things," he said, with a forced lightness that did not deceive his observer; "there is only one thing in the way that bothers me."

He said it more to himself than Mattie, who cried, instinctively—

"What's that, Sir?"

"Why, that's my secret," he responded, shutting up on the instant; "and I shall keep it till the last."

He had turned very stern and rigid; Mattie felt that she had crossed the line of demarcation, and withdrew into herself and her needle-work with a sigh.

Sidney Hinchford shook himself away from that dark thought instanter.

"You're as curious as ever, Mattie; you'll be a true woman. I would not be your husband for the world."

Mattie felt herself crimson on the instant, and a strange wild commotion in her heart ensued, more unaccountable than the mystery which had deepened around her. They were light, idle words of his, but they made her cheeks flush and her bosom heave; he spoke in jest, almost in sarcasm, but the words rang in her ears as though he had thundered them forth with all the power of his lungs.

When all this Suffolk Street life was over; when she and he, when she and they whom she loved had gone their separate ways, when she was an old woman, she remembered Sidney Hinchford's words.

Still she flashed back the jesting reply—or whatever it was—with a quickness that was startling.

"You'll wait till you're asked," she said.

At this moment some one knocked at the outer door.

"Hollo!—a late customer like me," said Sidney, opening the door as he was nearer to it, and then staring with surprise at the person who had arrived—no less a person than Mr. Wesden himself.

"Hollo!" he said again; "nothing wrong, Sir, I hope?"

"Not at home," was the dry response. "Is anything wrong here?"

"Oh! no."

He entered, took the door-handle from Sidney, and closed the door himself, turned the key in the lock, and drew the bolts to. Sidney Hinchford thought Mr. Wesden looked very nervous that evening—very different from his usual stolid way.

"You're quite sure—quite sure that it's all right, Sir?" asked Sidney, his thoughts flashing to Harriet again.

"I said so; I never tell an untruth, Sidney. Good night."

"Good night, Sir. Oh!" turning back, "the letter-paper, Mattie—I had forgotten."

Mr. Wesden watched the transfer of the writing paper from the drawer to Sidney Hinchford's hands, glancing furtively from Sidney to Mattie, gradually unwinding a woollen comforter from his neck meanwhile.

When Sidney had withdrawn, very much perplexed, but too dignified to ask any more questions, Mr. Wesden turned to Mattie.

"What's he doing down here at this time of night, Mattie?"

"He came for writing paper—he's very busy."

"What are *you* sitting up for?"

"To see to the gas-burners in the drawing-room."

"Turn the gas off at the meter, and leave him in the dark next time," said Mr. Wesden. "You can go to bed now. I'll sit up for a little while; I'm going to sleep here to-night."

"Indeed, Sir. Oh! Sir, I hope that nothing serious *has* happened?"

"Nothing at all. It's not so very wonderful that I should come to my own house, I suppose, Mattie?"

"N—no," she answered, hesitating; "but it's past one o'clock."

"I couldn't sleep—and Harriet was at home with the good lady," he said, as if by way of excuse; adding very sulkily, a moment afterwards, "I never could sleep in that Camberwell place—I wish I'd never left the shop!"

Mr. Wesden hazarded no further reason for his eccentric arrival, and Mattie went up stairs to lay it with the rest of her stock of mysteries daily accumulating around her. Mr. Wesden remained downstairs, fidgeting with shop drawers, counting the money left in the till, and wandering up and down in a reckless, hypochondriacal fashion, very remarkable in a man of his phlegmatic temperament, and which it was as well for Mattie not to have seen.

Finally he groped his way down stairs into the kitchen, and the coal-cellar where the gas-meter was placed, and with a wrench cut off the supply of gas for that night, casting Sidney Hinchford so suddenly into darkness, that he leaped up with an exclamation far from appropriate to his character.

"What the devil next?"

The next thing for Sidney was to knock over the chair he had been sitting upon, which came down on the drawing-room floor with

a bumping noise that shook the house, and woke up his father, who shouted forth his name.

"Coming, coming," said Sidney, walking into the double-bedded room, and giving up further study or brooding for that night.

"What's the matter, Sid, my boy?" asked the father, from the corner; "haven't you been in bed yet?"

"Must have fallen asleep in the next room, I think."

"And a terrible row you've made in waking, Sid. Good night, my boy—God bless you!"

The old gentleman turned on his side, and was soon indulging in the snores of the just again. There was a night-light burning there, and Sidney took it from its saucer of water and held it above his head, looking down at that old, world-worn, yet handsome face of his father.

"God bless *you!*" he said, re-echoing his father's benediction; "how will you bear it when the time comes, I wonder?"

CHAPTER VI.

A BURST OF CONFIDENCE.

Yes, Mr. Wesden, late of Suffolk Street, had become nervous and eccentric in his old age—many people do, besides stationers. He had retired from business too late to enjoy the relaxation from business cares; he had better have died in harness than have given up the shop, for isolation therefrom began to work its evil.

He had not had much to worry him in his middle age; his youth had been a struggle, but he had been young and strong to bear with it, blest by a homely and affectionate wife, who struggled with him and consoled him; then had followed for more years than we care to reckon just now, the every-day life of a London shopkeeper—a life of business-making and money-making, plodding on in one groove, with little change to distract his attention or trouble his brain. All quiet and monotonous, but possessing for John Wesden peace of mind, which, if not exactly happiness, was akin to it. And now in his old age, when every habit had been burned into him as it were,

business was over, and idleness became a sore trial to him. And then after idleness came his daughter to worry him, not to mention Mattie, who worried him most of all, for reasons which we shall more closely particularise a chapter or two hence.

So with these troubles bearing all at once upon a mind that had been at its ease in its stronger days, Mr. Wesden turned eccentric. Want of method rendered him fidgety, the mysteries in *his* path, as well as Mattie's, perplexed him; he was verging upon hypochondriacism without being aware of it himself; and that suspicious nature which had been born with him, began to develop itself more, and give promise of bearing forth bitter fruit. Possibly before his concern for his daughter's health, was his concern for the shop in Great Suffolk Street, which he considered that he had neglected in leaving to the charge of a girl not eighteen years of age, and which, since the robbery, was an oppression that weighed heavily upon him. He was full of fancies concerning that shop; his mind—which unfortunately was fed by fancies at that time—began to give way somewhat when he took it in his head to think something had happened, at twelve o'clock at night, and start at once for Great Suffolk Street, as we have noticed in our preceding chapter.

The ice once broken, the eccentricities of Mr. Wesden did not diminish; he had his old bedroom seen to in the house again, and surprised Mattie more than once after this by sudden appearances at untimely hours. He had a right to look after his business—did *people* think that he had lost his interest in the shop, because he lived away from it?—did *people* think that he was not sharp enough for business still? With these changes he became more nervous, more irritable, and less considerate; yet brightening up sometimes for weeks together, and becoming his old stolid self again, to the relief of his wife and daughter. That daughter detected the change in her father also, woke up at last to the fact that her own thoughtfulness had tended to unsettle him, and became more like her old self also—or rather, more of an actress, with the power to personate that self from which she had seceded.

Everything was going wrong with our characters, when Harriet Wesden broke through the ice one night with that impulsiveness which she had not lived down or grown out of. It was strange that she always broke down in Mattie's presence; that only in the company of the stray did she feel the wish to avow all, and seek counsel in return. To Harriet Wesden the impulse was incomprehensible, but it was beyond her strength at times and carried her away. She loved Mattie; she saw in her the faithful friend rather than the servant; she knew that the child's passionate love for her had grown with Mattie's growth, and absorbed her being. But love was but half the reason with Harriet, and she would not own—which was the secret—that the weak and timid nature sought relief from a mind that had grown strong and practical in a rough school.

A need of sympathy, a perplexity becoming greater every day, allied to a love for the *confidante*, brought about the truth, which escaped in the old fashion.

She had been paying her visit—an afternoon one in this instance—to Mattie at the shop; it was a dull season, and no business stirring; the December gloom preyed upon the spirits of most people abroad that day; it affected Harriet more than usual, or the pressure of the old thoughts reduced her to subjection at last. The two girls were sitting by the fireside, Mattie with her face turned to the shop door, when Harriet Wesden laid both her hands suddenly on our heroine's.

"Mattie," she cried, "look me in the face a moment!"

"Come round to the little light there is left, then."

"There!"

Harriet Wesden set her pretty face, pale and anxious then, more into the light required. Mattie regarded it attentively.

"Isn't it a false face?" asked Harriet, in an excited manner—"the face of one who brings sorrow and wrong to all who know her?"

"I hope not."

"It is!" she asserted. "Oh! Mattie, I am in distress and terrible doubt—I have been foolish and acted inconsiderately—I am in a maze, that becomes more tangled with every step I take—tell me what to do!"

"You ought to know best, dear—you should not have any troubles which you are afraid to confess to your father and mother, and—Mr. Hinchford."

"Yes, yes, but not to them first of all," she cried. "Oh! Mattie, I am not a wicked girl, God knows—I have never had a thought of wickedness—I would like everybody in the world to be as happy as I was once myself."

"Once!" repeated Mattie. "Oh! I won't have that."

"I don't think," she added, very thoughtfully regarding the fire, "that I shall be ever happy again. Now, Mattie dear, I'm going to swear you to secrecy, and then ask what you would do in my place."

"You're very kind to trust in me—but is there no one else?—Miss Eveleigh, for instance."

"She's a worse silly than I am!"

"Your mother."

"I should frighten her to death—she and father are both weak and altering very much. Oh! Mattie if they should die and leave me alone in the world!"

"Need you get nervous about that just now?"

"I'm nervous about everything—I'm unsettled—Mattie, I have acted very treacherously to *him*."

"To Mr. Sidney!—not to Mr. Sidney?"

"Yes," was the answer.

Mattie became excited. How had it occurred?—who had done it?—who had stolen her thoughts away from him?

"I have been trying very hard to love him—sometimes I think I do love him better than the—the *other*—just for a while, when he is very happy sitting near me, and very full of the future, that can never, never come."

"Go on, please," said the curious Mattie.

"Mattie, you remember Mr. Darcy?" she asked, spasmodically.

"Mr. Darcy—no," said the puzzled Mattie.

"The gentleman who—who fell in love with me when I was a child," she explained, very rapidly, and with still greater excitement, "whom I thought I had forgotten, and who had forgotten me, until I met him again."

"Oh! this *is* wrong!" exclaimed Mattie.

"I know it—I have owned it!" cried Harriet; "let me tell the story out. I met him, parted coldly from him, met him again, all by accident on my part; met him for a third time at the Eveleighs', with whom he had got on visiting terms; met him day after day, evening after evening there, until the spell was on me which overpowered me, and robbed me of my peace—until I loved him, Mattie!"

"And he knows——"

"He knows nothing, save that I am engaged to be another's—and that I dare scarcely think of him."

"He knows too much, *I* know," said Mattie reflectively; "and he has found a way to turn you against Mr. Sidney. What a wonder he must be!"

"Poor Sidney!"

"And to think it's all over between you and him," added Mattie—"him who thinks so much of you, and is growing old to my eyes, with the fear upon him which I understand now, and which is now so natural!"

"What fear?"

"Of losing you."

"I am so sorry—*so* very sorry for him. And I am ashamed to think that I have led him on to build his hopes upon me, and now must dash them down."

"Yes—to-night," said Mattie, thoughtfully.

"To-night!" exclaimed Harriet, in alarm.

"I don't know much about these things—I never understood what love for a young man was, having had too much to do," she added with a little laugh that echoed strangely in that shadowy room, "but it don't seem quite the thing to keep two on, or both of them in suspense about you."

"Do you think I would?" asked Harriet, proudly.

"It seems to me that if I were in your place, I should take a pattern from Mr. Sidney, and speak out at once—go straight at it, as he calls it, and tell him everything."

"But——"

Mattie became excited in her turn.

"It isn't right—it isn't fair to let a man keep thinking of you, when you've turned against him," she cried; "it's cowardly and base to hide the truth from him, or be afraid of telling it. It won't kill him, Harriet, for he's a proud spirit, that will bear up through it all, bitterly as he will feel it for a while."

"I'm not afraid—it is not that," said Harriet; "I only wish to know what you would think the best method of telling him all, and yet sparing him pain. I have been fancying that if *you* hinted to him at first the truth——"

"*I* hint!" exclaimed Mattie, "not for the world. I'm only a servant here, and you might as well ask poor Ann Packet to hint the truth as me. I'm sorry—you will never know how sorry I am—that you two are going to break it off for ever; but I should be more sorry still if you let to-night go by, and not try hard to face him."

"Mattie, I will face him," said Harriet, with her lips compressed "I will tell him all. After all, it was not an engagement, and I was as free as he to make my choice elsewhere if I preferred. I am not in the wrong to tell him that my girlish fancy was a mistake."

"No—only in the wrong to keep the truth back."

"You will not think that I have intentionally attempted to deceive poor Sidney, will you?"

"God forbid, my dear."

"Vain—frivolous, and weak—anything but cruel. Yes, I will tell him all when he comes back to-night. There is no use in delay."

"Only danger," added Mattie, remembering her copy-book admonition; a copy which Sidney Hinchford had set her himself in the old days, when she was deep in text-hand.

"And then when it is all told, and he knows that I am free, happiness will come again, I suppose. Heigho! I was very happy once."

"Happiness will come again," said Mattie, more cheerfully, "to be sure."

"Mattie, I have been trying very hard to think of Mr. Sidney, first of all; it is that trying which has made me ill. I know he loves me very much, and will never think of anybody else; and it is—it is hard upon him now!"

"You must be very fond of this other one," said Mattie. "Is he handsome?"

"Very."

"And very fond of you, of course?"

"Yes; but it is a struggle to keep his love back—I am cold to him—and I—I will *not* listen to him, and so drive him to despair. Oh!

I am a miserable wretch! I make everybody unhappy whom I meet."

The weak girl burst into tears, and rocked herself to and fro on the chair before the fire. Mattie passed her arms round her neck and drew the pretty agitated face to her bosom, soothing it there as though she had been a mother troubled with love-sick daughters of her own.

"It will soon be over now," Mattie said, when Harriet was more composed. "Try and be calm; think of what you shall say to poor Sidney, while I attend to the shop a bit."

Mattie went into the shop, leaving Harriet Wesden with her chin clutched in both hands, looking dreamily at the fire. She was more composed now the whole truth had escaped her; she felt that she should be happy in time, after Sidney Hinchford had been told all, and that terrible ordeal of telling it had been gone through. One more scene, which had made her shudder to forestall by sober thought, and then the new life, brighter and rosier from that day!

Poor Sidney! what should she say to him, to soften the look which would rise to his dark eyes and transfix her? What was best to say and do, to keep him from thinking ill of her, and despising her for vacillation?

Mattie came in, looking white and scared; but Harriet, possessed by a new thought which had suddenly dashed in upon her, failed to observe the change.

"Mattie, dear," she cried, "if he should think I give him up because he's poorer than Mr. Darcy—that it is for the sake of money that I turn away from him!"

"Money's a troublesome thing," said Mattie, snatching up her bonnet from the sideboard, and putting it on her head with trembling hands; "if you take your eyes from it an instant it's gone."

"But, Mr. Darcy——"

"Oh! bother Mr. Darcy," was the half-peevish exclamation. "I have been listening to you, and they've robbed the shop again. Everything's against me just now. Mind the place till I come back, please."

CHAPTER VII.

THE PLAN FRUSTRATED.

Yes, the house in Great Suffolk Street had been again visited by "the dangerous classes." It was a house well watched, or a house that was doomed to be unfortunate in its latter days. A house left in charge of a girl of seventeen, therefore likely to have its weak points, and considered worth watching in the dark hours. This was Mattie's idea upon awakening to the conviction of a second successful attempt upon Wr. Wesden's property; but Mattie was wrong.

The robbery was the result of accident and neglect, as most robberies are in this world. A youth had entered the shop to make a small purchase, and hammered honestly on the counter with the edge of his penny piece—a youth of no principle, certainly, brought up ragged, dirty, ignorant, and saucy—a Borough boy. Fate and the devil contrived that Mattie should be absorbed in the love-story of Harriet Wesden at the time, and the boy finding no attention paid to his summons, looked over the shop blind, saw the rapt position of the parlor occupants, dropped upon his hands and knees like a lad brought up to the "profession," and slid insidiously towards the till, which he found locked and keyless. Fortune being against his possession of any current coin of the realm, the young vagabond turned his attention to stock, and in less time than it takes to sum up his defalcations, had appropriated and made off with a very large parcel underneath the counter—a parcel that Wiggins, wholesale stationers of Cannon Street, had just forwarded by London Parcels' Delivery Company to order of John Wesden, Esq., and which parcel had been found almost too large to decamp with.

Mattie thought no more of Harriet Wesden's troubles; here was a second instance of her carelessness—of her incapacity for business. What would Mr. Wesden think now—he who had been so cold and strange to her after the last robbery? And what did she deserve—she who had had a trust committed to her and abused it?

Mattie did not give way to any ebullition of tears; she was a girl with considerable self-command, and only betrayed her agitation by her whiter face. She did all that lay in her power to remedy the great error, leaving Harriet Wesden in charge of the shop whilst she ran down Great Suffolk Street and towards the Borough, hoping

to overtake the robber. Straight to Kent Street went Mattie; thieves would be sure to make for Kent Street—all the years of her honest life faded away like a dream, and she ran at once to the house of a receiver of stolen goods, a house that she had known herself in the old guilty past. Her hand was on the latch of the door, when a policeman touched her on the arm,

"Do you want anything here?"

"I've been robbed of a large parcel—I thought they must have brought it here."

"Why here?"

"This is Simes's—this used to be Simes's—surely."

"Yes, and it's Simes's still; but nobody's been here with a parcel. You haven't been and left nobody in Mr. Wesden's shop?" was his inelegant query.

Mattie did not remark that the policeman knew her then; she was too excited by her loss.

"Mr. Wesden's daughter's there."

"Then you had better come round to the police-station, and state your loss, Miss."

Mattie thought so too; she went to the police-station, mentioned the facts of the robbery, the nature of the parcel stolen, &c., and then returned very grave and disconsolate to Great Suffolk Street, to find three customers waiting to be served, Harriet turning over drawer after drawer in search of the goods required, and one woman waiting for change, which Harriet, having mislaid her own purse, and found the till locked, was unable to give her.

Mattie turned to business again, attended to the customers, and then re-entered the parlour.

"It cannot be helped, and I must make the best of it," said Mattie; "I don't mind the loss it is to me, who'll pay for it out of my own earnings, as I do the vexation it will be to your father."

"Leave it to me, Mattie," said Harriet; "when I go home this evening I will tell him exactly how it occurred, and how it was not your fault but mine. And, Mattie, I intend to pay for it myself, and not have your hard earnings intrenched upon."

"You're not in trust here," said Mattie, somewhat shortly; "if I don't pay for it, I shall be unhappy all my life."

"Then it's over and done with, and I wouldn't fret about it," said Harriet, suddenly finding herself in the novel position of comforter.

"I never fret—and I said that I would make the best of it," replied Mattie, placing her chair at the parlour door, half within the room and half in the shop; "and if I'm ever tricked again whilst I remain here, it's very odd to me."

Harriet Wesden, not much impressed by so matter-of-fact an event as a robbery, was anxious to return to the subject which more closely

affected herself; the parcel, after all, was of no great value; the police were doubtless looking for the thief; let the matter be passed over for the present, and the great distress of her unsettled mind be once more gravely dwelt upon! This was scarcely selfishness —for Harriet Wesden was not a selfish girl—it was rather an intense craving for support in the hard task of shattering another's hopes.

They had tea together in that little back parlour, and Harriet found it difficult work to keep Mattie's thoughts directed to the subject upon which advice had been given before the theft.

"You will not think of me," she said at last, reproachfully; "and what does it matter about the rubbishing parcel?"

"What can I do for you, more?" asked Mattie, wearily. Her head ached very much with all the excitement of that day, and she was inwardly praying for the time to pass, and the boy to put the shutters up. The robbery was *not* of great importance, and she wondered why it troubled her so much, and rendered her anxiety for others, just for a while, of secondary interest. Did she see looming before her the shadow of her coming trial? was there foreknowledge of all in store for her, stealing in upon her that dark December's night? She was superstitious enough to think so afterwards, when the end had come and life had wholly changed with her!

After tea, Mattie's impression became less vivid, for Harriet's nervousness was on the increase. The stern business of life gave way to the romance—stern enough also at that time—of Harriet Wesden. It was close on seven o'clock, and every minute might bring the well-known form and figure home.

"I shan't know what to say," said Harriet; "it seems out of place to ask him in here, and coolly begin at once to tell him not to think of me any more, just as he comes home from business, tired and weary, too, poor Sid! Shall I write to him?—I'll begin the letter now, and leave it here for you to give him. Oh! I can't face him—I shall never be able to face him, and tell him how fickle-minded I am!"

"Write to him if you wish then, Harriet; perhaps it is best, and will spare you both some pain."

"Yes, yes, I'll write," said Harriet, opening Mattie's desk instantly, and sending its neatly arranged contents flying right and left; "it *is* much the better way—why make a scene of it?—I hate scenes! And I'm not fickle-minded, Mattie," suddenly reverting to her self-accusation of a moment since; "for I had a right to think for myself, and choose for myself—we were not to be engaged till next month; and I did like him once—I do now, somehow! I. *he* will only think well of me afterwards, and not despise me, poor fellow, and believe that I had a right to turn away from him, if my heart said that I was not suitable for him at the last. If he—Mattie, *where* do you keep your pens?"

Mattie remarked that she had turned the box full amongst the letter-paper. Harriet sat herself down to write the letter after much preparation and agitation; Mattie looked at her, sitting there, in the full light of the gas above her head, and thought how pretty a *child* she looked—how unfit to cope with the world's harshness—how lucky for her that she was the only child of parents who had made money for her, and so smoothed one road in life at least. Yes, more a child than a woman even then; captious, excitable, easily influenced, swayed by a passing gust of passion like a leaf, trembling at the present, at the future, always unresolved, and yet always, by her trust and confidence in others, even by her sympathy for others, to be loved.

Mattie went into the shop, leaving Harriet to compose her epistle; after a while, and when she was brooding on the parcel again, and wondering if Mrs. Watts were at the bottom of the robbery, Harriet called her. She took her place again on the neutral ground, between parlour and shop, and found Harriet very much discomfited; her face flushed, her fair hair ruffled about her ears, her blue eyes full of tears.

"I don't know what to say—I can't think of anything that's kind enough, and good enough for *him*. What would you say, Mattie?"

"And you that have had so much money spent on your education to ask me—still a poor, ignorant, half-taught girl, Miss Harriet!"

"I'm too flurried to collect my thoughts—I *can't* think of the right words," she said; "I can't tell him of Mr. Darcy before Mr. Darcy has spoken to me—and I—I don't like to write down that I—I don't love him—never did love him—it looks so spiteful, dear! Mattie, what would you say?"

"I should simply tell him the story which you told me."

"He might show the letter to father and mother, who are anxious—oh! much more anxious than you fancy—to marry me to Sidney."

"They know his value, Harriet."

"And then it will all come at once to trouble them, instead of breaking it by degrees. Well, it's my fate. I must not keep it from them."

"No. How much have you written?"

"'Dear Sidney'—and—and the day of the month, of course. Oh! dear—here he is!"

Away went paper and pens into the desk again, and the desk cleared from the table, and turned topsy-turvy on to a chair.

"Oh! the top of the ink-stand's out—look here!—oh! what a mess there'll be!" cried Mattie.

Harriet reversed the desk.

"Perhaps it's not all spilt—I'm very sorry to have made such a

mess of it, and—and it's only Sidney's father after all. Don't tell him I'm here."

The old gentleman came into the shop, and nodded towards Mattie standing in the doorway.

"Has my boy come home?" he asked.

"Not yet, Sir."

The father's countenance assumed a doleful expression on the instant—life without his boy was scarcely worth having.

"He's very late, then, for I'm late," looking at his watch; "I hope he hasn't been run over."

Mattie laughed at the expression of the father's fear.

"That's not likely, Sir."

"People do get run over at times, especially in the City, and more especially near-sighted people. There's nothing to laugh at."

And rather offended at the manner in which his gloomy suggestion had been received, Mr. Hinchford, senior, passed through the side door into the passage. Mattie found Harriet at the desk again, picking out several sheets of paper saturated with ink, and arranging them of a row on the fender.

"More ink, dear—more ink!" she cried, impetuously; "I've thought of what to say. Don't keep me long without the ink."

Mattie replenished her ink-stand, and Harriet dashed into the subject with vigour, slackened after the first few lines, then came to a dead stop, and stared intently at the paper. Mattie went into the shop for fear of disturbing Harriet's train of ideas, remained there an hour attending to customers and arranging stock, finally went back into the parlour.

The desk was closed once more; a heap of torn papers was on the floor. Harriet, with her bonnet and shawl on, and her eyes red with weeping, was pacing up and down the room.

"No letter?" asked Mattie.

"I can't write a letter, and tell him what a wretch I am," she said, "and if I face him to-night I shall drop at his feet. Girl," she cried, passionately, "do you think it is so easy to act as I have done, and then avow it?"

"I should not be ashamed to own it," was Mattie's calm answer; "I should consider it my duty to tell him."

"And I will tell him all. God knows I would not deceive him for the world, Mattie, or leave him in ignorance of the true state of my heart. But I cannot tell him now. I'm afraid!"

There was real fear in her looks—an intense excitement, that even alarmed Mattie. She saw, after all, that it was best to keep the secret back for that night.

"Then I would go home, Harriet, at once. To-morrow, when you are calmer, you may be able to write the letter."

"Yes, yes—to-morrow I will write it. I shall have all day before

me, and can tear up as many sheets as I like. I will write it to-morrow, and post it from Camberwell. Mattie, as I'm a living woman, and as I pray to be free from this suspense and torture, I WILL write to him to-morrow!"

"One day is not very important," said Mattie, in reply, little dreaming of the difference that day would make. "Delays are dangerous—delays are dangerous"—she had written twenty times in her copy-book, and taken not to heart; and there *was* danger on its way to those who had put off the truth, and to him for whom they feared it.

"Delays are dangerous!" Take it to heart, O reader, and remember it in the hour when you shrink from the truth, as from a hot iron that may sear you. Wise old admonitions of our copy-book times—we might do worse very often than laugh at ye!

CHAPTER VIII.

A SUDDEN JOURNEY.

HARRIET WESDEN hurried away after her promise; Mattie, at the last moment, recalling to her notice the fact of the robbery, and reminding her of the way in which she ought to break the news to her father. Then the excited girl darted away to Camberwell, and it was like the stillness of the grave in the back parlour after her departure. Mattie went in for an instant to set the place to rights, and then returned to her watch in the shop, and to her many thoughts, born of that day's incidents. She was quite prepared for a visit from Mr. Wesden at a late hour, but Mr. Wesden's movements under excitement were not to be calculated upon; and we may say here that the knowledge of his loss did not bring him post-haste to Great Suffolk Street. Mattie was thinking of her loss, when the passage door opened, and the white head of Mr. Hinchford peered round and looked up at the clock, over the top shelf where the back stock was kept. The movement reminded Mattie of the time, and she glanced at the clock herself—*half-past nine.*

"I thought the clock had stopped up stairs," he said by way of explanation for his appearance.

"I had no idea it was so late," said Mattie.

"I had no idea it was so early," responded Mr. Hinchford; adding, after a pause, "though I can't think where the boy has got to; he said he would be home early as he had some accounts to look through."

"It's not very late, Sir, and if he has gone to Camberwell, not knowing Miss Harriet was here to-night——"

"He always comes home first—I never knew him go anywhere without coming home first to tell me. But," with another look at the clock, "it's not so very late, as you say, Mattie."

"He will be here in a minute."

"I hope so," said Mr. Hinchford, going to the shop door, and looking down the street, "for it's coming on to rain, and he has no umbrella. The boy will catch his death of cold."

After standing at the door for two or three minutes, the old gentleman turned to go up stairs again.

"It'll be a thorough wet night—I'll tell Ann to keep plenty of hot water in the boiler—nothing like your feet in hot water to stave off a cold."

He retired. Half an hour afterwards he reappeared in the shop, excitable and fidgety.

"I can't make it out," he said, after another inspection of the clock; "there's something wrong."

"Perhaps he has gone to the play, Sir."

"Pooh! he hates plays," was the contemptuous comment to this; 'he wouldn't waste his time in a playhouse. No, Mattie, there's something wrong."

"I don't think so," said Mattie, cheerfully. "I would not worry about his absence just yet, Sir."

"I'll give him another hour, and then I'll go down to the office and ask after him."

"Or find him there, Sir."

"No, they're not busy, I think. He can't be there. Mattie," he said suddenly. "Have you noticed a difference in him lately?"

"I—I fancy he seems, perhaps, a little graver; but then he's growing older and more manly every day."

"Ah! he grows a fine fellow—there isn't such another boy in the world—perhaps it's all a fancy of mine, after all."

Mattie knew that it was no fancy; that even Sidney's care and histrionic efforts could not disguise his trouble entirely from the father. But she played the part of consoler to Mr. Hinchford as well as she was able, and the old gentleman, less disturbed in mind, returned to his room for the second time.

But time stole on, and Mattie herself found a new anxiety added to those which had heretofore disturbed her. The wet night set in as Mr. Hinchford had prophesied; the boy came and put up the shutters; the clock ticked on towards eleven; all but the public-

houses were closed in Great Suffolk Street, and there were few loiterers about.

Ann Packet brought in the supper, and was informed of the day's two features of interest—the robbery, and the absence of Mr. Sidney. Ann Packet, of slow ideas herself, and slower still in having other ideas instilled into her, thought that the missing parcel was connected with the missing lodger, and so conglomerated matters irremediably.

"You may depend upon it, Mattie, he'll bring the parcel back—it's one of his games—he was a rare boy for tricks when I knew him fust."

"Ann, you've been asleep," said Mattie, sharply.

"I couldn't help it," answered Ann, submissively; "it was very lonely down there, with no company but the *beadles*—and times ain't as they used to was, when you could read to me, and was more often down there."

"Ah! times are altering," sighed Mattie.

"And Mr. Wesden don't like me here till after the shop's shut—because he can't trust me, or I talk too much, I s'pose," she said, "but now, dear, sit down and tell me all about everything, to keep my sperits up."

Ann Packet and Mattie always supped together after the shop was closed—Ann Packet lived for supper time now, looked forward all the day to a "nice bit of talk" with the girl who had won upon those affections which three-fourths of her life had rusted from disuse.

"It's uncommon funny that I never had anybody to care about afore I knowed you, Mattie," she said regularly, once or twice a week; "no father, mother, sisters, anybody, till you turned up like the ace in spekkilation. And now, let me hear you talk, my dear—I don't fancy that your tongue runs on quite so fast as it did."

Ann Packet curled herself in her chair, hazarded one little complaint about her ankles, which were setting in badly again with the Christmas season, and then prepared to make herself comfortable, when once more Mr. Hinchford appeared, with his hat, stick, and great cloak this time.

"Mattie, I can't stand it any longer—I'm off to the office in the City."

Mattie did not like the look of his excited face.

"I'd wait a little while longer, Sir."

"No—something has happened to the boy."

"Shall I go with you, Sir?"

"God bless the girl!—what for?"

"For company's sake—it's late for you to be alone, Sir."

"Don't you think I can take care of myself?—am I so old, feeble, and drivelling as that? Are they right at the office, after all?" he added in a lower tone.

"I shouldn't like to be left here all alone," murmured Ann Packet; "particularly after there's been robberies, and——"

There was the rattle of cab-wheels in the street, coming nearer and nearer towards the house.

"Hark!" said Mattie and Mr. Hinchford in one breath.

The rattling ceased before the door, the cab stopped, Mr. Hinchford pointed to the door, and gasped, and gesticulated.

"Open, o—open the door!—he has met with an accident!"

"No, no, he has only taken a cab to get here earlier, and escape the wet," said Mattie, opening the door with a beating heart, nevertheless.

Sidney Hinchford, safe and sound, was already out of the cab and close to the door. Mattie met him with a bright smile of welcome, to which his sombre face did not respond. He came into the shop, stern and silent, and then looked towards his father.

"I thought you might have gone to bed, father," he said.

"Bed!" ejaculated Mr. Hinchford, in disgust; "what has—what has——"

"Come up stairs, I wish to speak to you."

Father and son went up stairs to their room, leaving Mattie at the open door. The cab still remained drawn up there; the cabman stood by the horse's head, stolid as a judge in his manifold capes.

"Are you waiting for anything?" asked Mattie.

"For the gemman, to be sure."

"Going back again?"

"He says so—I spose it's all right," he added dubiously; "you've no back door which he can slip out of?"

"Slip out of!" cried the disgusted Mattie, slamming the front door in his face for his impudent assertion.

Meanwhile Sidney Hinchford was facing his father in the drawing-room.

"Sit down and take the news coolly, Sir," he said; "there is nothing gained by putting yourself in a flurry."

"N—no, no, my boy, n—no."

"I have no time to spare, and I wish to leave you all right before I go."

"Go!"

"I am going for a day or two, very likely for a week, on a special mission for my employers—that is all that I can tell you without breaking the confidence placed in me—I must go at once."

"Bless my soul! what—what can I possibly do without you! Can't I go with you? Can't I——"

"You can do nothing but wait patiently for my return, believing that I am safe, and taking care of myself. Why, what are a few days?"

"Well, not much after all," said the father, wiping his forehead with his silk-handkerchief, "and there's no danger, of course?"

"Not any."

"And you are only going——"

"A journey of a few days. Try and calm yourself whilst I pack a few things in my portmanteau. There, that's well!"

Sidney passed into the other room, leaving his father still struggling with the effects of his astonishment. The portmanteau must have been filled without any regard for neatness, for Sidney in a few minutes returned with it in his hands.

"Why, you should be proud of this journey of mine," he said with a forced lightness that could only have deceived his father; "think what it is to be chosen out of the whole office to undertake this business."

"It's a good sign. Yes, I see that now."

"And I shall be back sooner than you expect, perhaps. Why, you and I must not part like two silly girls, to whom the journey of a few miles is the event of a life. Now, good-bye, Sir—God keep you strong and well till I come back again!"

"And you my lad, and you, too."

"Amen. God grant it."

There was a strange earnestness in the son's voice, but the father was still too much excited to take heed.

"And now good-bye again," shaking his father's hands; "you'll stay here, Sir, you'll not come down any more to-night."

"Yes, I will."

"You must try and keep calm; I will beg you as a favour to remain here, father."

"Well, well, if you wish it—but I'm not a child."

Sidney released his father's hands, caught up his portmanteau, and marched down stairs. Mattie, pale with suppressed excitement, met him in the shop. He put down his burden, caught her by the wrist, and drew her into the parlour. Seeing Ann Packet there, he bade her go down stairs somewhat abruptly, released his grip of Mattie, and waited for Ann's withdrawal, beating his foot impatiently upon the carpet.

Mattie looked nervously towards him, and thought that she had never seen him look more stern and hard. His face was deathly white, and his eyes burned like coals behind the glasses that he wore.

"Mattie," he said, "you and I, my father and you, are old friends."

"Yes, Sir."

"I will ask a favour of you before I go. Take care of him! Ask him to come down here to smoke his pipe with you, and keep him as light-hearted as you can till I return."

"Who?—I, Sir?"

"You have the way with you; you are quick to observe, and it will not take much pains to keep him pleased, I think. When he begins to wonder why I haven't returned, break to him by degrees that I have deceived him, fearing the shock too sudden for his strength."

"Oh! Sir, how can you leave all this to me?"

"I have faith in no one else, Mattie, to do me this service. You are always cool, and will know the best way to proceed. Cheer up the old gentleman all you can, too;—you were a quaint girl once—don't let him miss me if you can help it."

"And you'll be gone——"

"Six weeks or two months."

"It's not a very happy journey, Sir."

"How do you know that?" was the quick rejoinder.

"You're not looking happy—there's trouble in your face, Mr. Sidney."

"Well, there is room for it, and I am going, as I fear, to face trouble, and bring back with me disappointment. We can't have it all our own way in this world, Mattie."

"No, Sir, that's not likely."

"And if there be more troubles than one ahead, why we must fight against them till we beat them back, or they—crush us under foot. Good-bye."

He shook hands with her long and heartily, adding, "You will remember your trust—you will break the news to him like a daughter?"

"I'll do my best, Sir."

"He knows that I cannot send him any letters."

"And, and—letters for you?"

She thought of the letter which Harriet Wesden, in her sleepless bed, might be pondering upon then. Of the new trouble which he seemed to guess not; for immediately afterwards he said—

"Keep the letters till I come back—and give my love to Harriet; tell her I shall think of her every hour of the day and night. I wrote to her the last thing this evening. Now, good-bye, old girl, and wish me luck."

"The best of luck, Mr. Sidney—with all my heart!"

"Luck in the distance—luck when I come back again, and see it shining in my Harriet's eyes. Ah! *it won't do!*" he added, with a stamp of his foot.

"I'll pray for it, Sir," cried Mattie; "we can't tell what may happen for the best, or what *is* for the best, however it may trouble us at first."

"Spoken like the parson at the corner shop," he said, a little irreverently. "Bravo, Mattie—honest believer!"

He passed from the shop into his cab, glancing at the upstairs

windows, and waving his hand for a moment towards his father, waiting anxiously there to see the last of him.

The cab rattled away the moment afterwards, and Sidney Hinchford was borne on his unknown journey.

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On the evening of the next day, a letter, in Harriet Wesden's hand-writing, was received. The postman and Mr. Hinchford, senior, came into the shop together.

"Sidney Hinchford, Esq.," said the postman.

"Thank you—I'll post it to him when he sends me his address," said Mr. Hinchford. "By Jove!" looking at the superscription, "the ladies miss him already."

Harriet Wesden had kept her promise, and found courage to write her story out.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CLOUDS THICKEN.

MATTIE had fully anticipated a visit from Mr. Wesden on the day following Sidney Hinchford's departure, but the master appeared not at the little shop in Great Suffolk Street. It was not till the following day that he arrived—at six in the morning, as the boy was taking down the shutters. Mattie's heart began beating painfully fast; she had become very nervous concerning Mr. Wesden, and his thoughts of her. Appearances had been against her of late, and he was a man who did not think so charitably as he acted sometimes.

He gave a gruff good morning, and came behind the counter.

"You can do what you like to-day," he said. "I'll mind the shop."

"Very well, Sir. I—I suppose," she added, hastily, "Miss Harriet has told you what happened the day before yesterday?"

"I know all about it. I don't want to talk about it."

"But I do, Sir!"

Mr. Wesden stared over Mattie's head after his old fashion. His will had been law so long, that disputing it rather took him aback.

"I know that these losses put you out, Mr. Wesden," said Mattie, firmly; "that they are due to my own carelessness—to having been taken off my guard after all my watch here, all my interest in everything connected with the business. I dream of the shop,—I would not neglect it for the world,—and it *is* hard to be so unfortunate as I have been. Mr. Wesden, you wouldn't let me repay back the money which was taken away from the house; but I must pay the value of that parcel stolen from before my very eyes."

"It was large enough to see," he added, "and I expect you to pay for it, Mattie."

"What was it worth?"

"You shall have the bill to settle, if you've saved as much—it will come in next week. And now, just understand, once for all, that I don't want to talk about it—that I object very much to talk about it."

"Very well."

The subject was dropped; Mattie felt herself in disgrace, and, intensely sorrowful at heart, she went down stairs to tell Ann Packet all that her carelessness had brought upon her.

"He's an old savage, my dear; don't mind him."

"No, Ann; he's a dear old friend, and his anger is just enough. It was all my fault!"

"Well, he's not such a bad master as he might be, pr'aps; but he isn't what he used to be before my ankles took to swelling, nothing like it."

"It will soon blow over, I hope," said Mattie.

"Bless your heart!—puffed away in a breath, it'll be."

Mattie, ever ready to console others, received consolation in her turn; and hoped for the best.

Late in the evening Mr. Wesden departed, and early next day, much to Mattie's surprise, Harriet Wesden, with a box or two, arrived in a cab to the house.

Mattie watched the entrance of the boxes, and looked very closely into the face of the young mistress. Harriet, with a smile that was well got up for the occasion, advanced to her.

"Think, Mattie, of my coming here to spend a week with you—of being your companion. Why, it will be the old times back again."

"I should be more glad to see you if I thought there were no other reason, Miss Harriet," said Mattie—"but there is!"

"Why, what can there——"

Mattie caught her by the sleeve.

"Your father suspects that I am not honest—the past life has come a little closer, and made him repent of all the past kindness—is not that it?"

"No, no, Mattie, dear—you must not think that!"

"He has grown suspicious of me—I can see it in his looks, in his altered manner; and, oh! I can do nothing to stop it—to show him that I am as honest as the day."

"Patience, Mattie, dear," said Harriet, "we will soon prove that to him, if he require proof. If I have come at his wish, it was at my own, too, and you are exaggerating the reasons that have brought me hither."

"I wonder why I stop here now," said Mattie, thoughtfully. "I, who am a young woman, and can get my own living. If he is tired of me, I have no right to stop."

"You will stop for the sake of those who love you, and who have trust in you, Mattie; you will not think of going away."

"Well not yet awhile. I think," dashing a rebellious tear from her dark eyes, "that I can bear more than this before I leave you all. And if things *do* look a little dark just now, I shall live them down, with God's help!"

"There's nothing dark—it's three-fourths fancy. Think of my sorrows, Mattie, and thank Heaven that you have never been in love!"

"Dreadful sorrows yours are, Miss Harriet, I must say!"

"People never think much of other people's sorrows," remarked Harriet, sententiously.

Thus it came about that Harriet Wesden and Mattie were thrown into closer companionship for a while, and that Mattie began to think that the constant presence of the girl she loved most in the world made ample amends for the suspicions which had placed her there, for the absence of Sidney Hinchford, and the mystery by which it had been characterised.

"It's astonishing how I miss Mr. Sidney," Mattie said, confidently, to Harriet, "though we did not say much more than 'good morning,' and 'good evening,' from one week's end to another; but he has been so long here, and become so long a part of home, that it does seem strange to have the place without him."

"And the letter—he never got the letter, after all," sighed Harriet.

"There it is, on the drawing-room mantelpiece," said Mattie; "bad news awaiting his return. I see it every morning there, and think of his coming disappointment."

"He'll soon get over it—men soon get over it," replied Harriet, "they have so much to do in the world, and so many things therein to distract them. It's not like us poor girls, who think of nothing else but whom it is best to love, and who will love *us* best."

"Speak for your own romantic self, Miss Harriet," said Mattie, laughing.

"You never think of these things!—you, close on eighteen years of age!"

"Never," said Mattie, fearlessly; "I seem a little out of the way of it—it's not in my line. But—I understand it well enough."

"Or you would never have taken my part against poor old Sid," said Harriet.

"And that reminds me that I am neglecting poor old Sid's father, and I promised not."

Sid's father required no small amount of attention, Mattie very quickly discovered; the absence of his son preyed upon the old gentleman, and left him entirely alone. The place was a desert without "the boy;"—with all his love for him, he could not have imagined that his absence would have led to such a blank. He thought that he could have put up with it, and jogged along in his old methodical way until Sid's return; but the horrors seized him in the attempt, and it was more of a struggle to keep time from killing him, than to kill the hoary enemy by distraction of pursuits.

He became absent over the account books at the builder's office, and the clerks laughed at him and his mistakes; whilst the employers, who had found him slow in his movements for some time, thought he was getting past work, and becoming unendurable. These old-fashioned clerks will get in the way, when the hand grows feeble, and the memory betrays them. Commerce has no fine feelings, and must sweep them aside for better men without compunction.

Mattie, remembering her promise to Sidney, and favoured in the performance of it by Harriet's extra service, played her cards well, and helped to wile away many hours that would have weighed heavily with Mr. Hinchford. An excuse to enter the room led to a remark concerning Sidney, which rendered the old gentleman voluble—and the presence of Harriet Wesden down stairs, his son's future wife, formed a good excuse to lure him into the parlour, and persuade him to smoke his pipe there. Then Mattie began to think that she should like to know backgammon, and Mr. Hinchford condescended to instruct her, as he had instructed her, when she was younger, in orthography and syntax. And, finally, when he was becoming excited about Sidney's non-appearance, and resolved one night to sit up for him, as he was positive of his return, Mattie essayed that difficult and delicate task which Sidney had confided to her—a task which Harriet was inclined to take upon herself—and somewhat jealous of Mattie being entrusted with it in her stead.

"He wrote to me the night he left; why didn't he ask me to console his father, I wonder?"

Mattie thought it was for the reason that consolation might be required at any moment, and that Sidney was ignorant of Harriet's intention to stay a few weeks at Great Suffolk Street; but Harriet Wesden on the scene was no reason for Mattie to relinquish her rights. Besides, she had confidence in her own powers of breaking

the news —and the unopened death-warrant on the mantelpiece was evidence of Harriet Wesden's rights being at an end.

The story was told by degrees then— what Mr. Sidney had said to Mattie, and wished her to do,—told with a gentleness and earnestness which did credit to Mattie's powers, and proved what a thoughtful, gentle woman she was becoming. Under the circumstances, also, she made the best of it, and though Mr. Hinchford pulled at his stock, and ruffled his white hair, and took a long while to understand it, yet it was a successful revelation.

"Always considerate, Mr. Sidney is," said Mattie, in conclusion; "most sons would have spoken out the truth at once, and gone away, leaving their fathers wholly miserable; he went at the subject like a daughter almost—didn't he, Sir?"

Mr. Hinchford had felt inclined to believe himself treated childishly, till Mattie put the question in this new light.

"Ah! he did——" he burst forth with; "he's a dear lad! What a lucky girl that Harriet Wesden is!"

Time passed on, and no Sidney's return. The nights drew in closer yet, and with their lengthier darkness deepened the shadows round the lives of all our characters. Sidney had stated his intention to write no letters, but they were expected nevertheless, and Harriet began to fancy that it was a little strange—as strange as her interest in Sidney and his movements, now that she had given him up for ever! A letter for herself, from Miss Eveleigh, diverted her attention somewhat—it had been sent to Camberwell, and posted on by her father.

"Miss Eveleigh is very anxious to see me for a few minutes," said Harriet. "She and her mother think of getting up some private theatricals at New Cross, and they want my assistance and advice."

"Private theatricals!—that's playing at being actors and actresses, isn't it, Miss Harriet?"

"Oh! yes. Such capital fun!"

"For the people who come to see you as well?" asked Mattie, guessing by intuition where the shoe must pinch.

"To be sure," responded Harriet; "they wouldn't come if they did not like, my dear; and the change will do me good, and I think I'll go."

Mattie detected a heightened colour in Harriet's cheek.

"You will see Mr. Darcy there?"

"Well—perhaps I shall," said Harriet; "and I have a right to think about him now, or let him think about me, if he will. Mattie, you don't mind me going?"

Mind!—why have I a right to stop you?"

"No; only I shall leave you all alone with that wearisome old man."

"He'll not weary me. Old friends never do."

"That sounds like a reproach, but you don't mean it, Mattie,"

said Harriet; "and, after all, I shall not be very long away. I shall take the train from London Bridge, and be there and back by eight o'clock."

Harriet hurried away to dress for her expedition; she came down in a flutter of high spirits, a very different being from the despondent, lackadaisical girl of a few weeks since. She had made up her mind to begin life and love afresh; uncertainty was over with her, and she was as gay and bright as the sunshine. But hers was a nature fit only for sunshine—the best and most lovable of girls when the shadows of every-day life were not cast on her track.

"By eight o'clock, Mattie; good-bye, my dear. Any advice?" she asked, pausing with a saucy look about her mouth.

"Yes. Don't fall too deeply in love with Mr. Darcy, before you are sure that he is falling in love with you!"

"I can bring him to my feet with a look," she said; "bring him home with a chain round his neck, like an amiable terrier."

"Let me have an opportunity of admiring your choice soon—we're all in the dark at present."

"Yes, father and mother too, until poor Sid," suddenly becoming grave, "breaks the seal of that letter it gave me grey hairs to write. Upon my word, Mattie, I found two in my head when I had finished it. I was so dreadfully shocked!"

"Well, the troubles are over."

"I think so—I hope so. Good-bye, my dear. Tell father where I have gone, if he should look in to-night. Home very early!"

She fluttered away, pausing to look in at the window and laugh through at Mattie once more.

"Perhaps it was as well she gave Sidney up," Mattie thought; "for she has been happier since, and all her dear bright looks are back again. What a wonderful man this Mr. Darcy must be! How I should like to see my darling's choice—the man that she thinks good enough for her! He must be a very good man, too; for with all her weakness, my Harriet despises deceit in any form, and would only love that which was honourable and true. But, then, why didn't she love Sidney Hinchford more? that's what puzzles me so dreadfully!"

She clutched her elbows with her hands, and bent herself into a Mother Bunch-like figure in the seat behind the counter, and went off into dream-land, strange dream-land, belonging to the border-country of the mists lying between the present and the future. A land of things beyond the present, and yet which could never appertain to any future, map it as she might in the brain that went to work so busily. Figures flitted before her of Harriet and Mr. Darcy—of Sidney Hinchford in his desolation, so strange a contrast to the happiness which he had sought—of herself passing from one to the other and endeavouring to do good and make others happy, the one ambition of this generous little heart. And her sanguine nature wound up the story—if it

were a story—with the general happiness of all her characters, just as we finish a story, if we wish to please our readers and win their patronage. Even Mr. Wesden would sink his suspicions in the deep water, and be the grave-faced, but kind-hearted patron again, in tha' border country wherein her thoughts were wandering.

Mr. Hinchford came home early to give her a lesson in back gammon, and was sadly disappointed to find Mattie on full duty in the shop that evening. He wandered about the shop himself for a while, and then went up stairs early to bed, discontented with his lonely position in society; and his place was taken by Ann Packet, who had got "the creeps," and had a craving for "company." Ann Packet's ankles were very bad again, and it was dull work mourning over their decadence in the kitchen, and no one to pity her condition, or promise to call upon her, when she was carried to "St. Tummas's." Even she went to bed early also; for the customers came in frequently, and kept Mattie's attention employed, and it was scarcely worth while sitting in a draught on the shop steps, for the chance of getting in a word now and then, not to mention the probability of Mr. Wesden turning up, and scolding her for coming into the shop at all, an act he had never allowed in his time.

At eight o'clock, Mattie was left alone to superintend business; the supper tray for her and Harriet was left upon the parlour table by Ann Packet; in a few minutes Harriet would be back again.

At half-past eight, Mattie went to the door to watch her coming up the street, a habit with nervous people, who would expedite the arrival of the loved one by these means. The action reminded her of Mr. Hinchford when Sidney was late, and when a few rain drops were blown towards her by a restless wind abroad that night, the remembrance of waiting for Sidney Hinchford startled her. "Just such a night as this when we sat up for him, and he came home at last, so wild and stern—when we had almost given up the hope of coming home at all—what a strange coincidence!" thought Mattie.

When the rain came suddenly and heavily down, the coincidence was more remarkable; and when the clock scored nine, then half-past, then ten, it was the old suspense again.

"What nonsense!" thought Mattie; "she's stopping up for the rain. It is not very late, and I am only fanciful as usual. Nothing can be wrong—it's not likely!"

Those customers who strayed in still, wondered why she looked so often at the clock, and stared so vacantly at them when they expressed their verdict on the weather; and the policeman on duty outside observed her frequent visits to the door, and her wild gaze down the street towards the Borough. Yes, the old story over again —an absent friend, an anxious watcher, a night of wind and rain in

Suffolk Street. The boy came to close the shop as usual, the door was shut *en regle*, and now it was Harriet's time to come back, rain or no rain, mystery or no mystery with her, and end the story *à la Sidney Hinchford.*

Mattie consulted a Bradshaw from the window, and found that the New Cross trains ran as late as twelve o'clock to London; this relieved her; Harriet was only waiting for the rain to clear up after all. But even midnight dragged its way towards her; and then the time passed in which she should have returned, and still no Harriet.

At one o'clock Mattie went to the door and looked out; the pavement was glistening yet, but the rain had abated, and the clouds were breaking up over head. There had been nothing to stop her —even if Mattie had believed for a moment that Harriet would have stayed away for the rain. When she gave her up—when it was close on two o'clock—the stars were shining brightly again, although the air felt damp and cold.

"She'll never come back any more!" moaned Mattie; "she has met with danger—I am sure of it! She has come to harm, and I am powerless to help her. I should not feel like this, if something had not happened!"

"Two," struck the clock of St. George's, Southwark; in the stillness of the streets it echoed towards her, and sounded like a death-bell. Mattie covered her face with her hands, and prayed silently for help, for one away from home. Then she sprung up again, piled some more coals on the fire, stirred it, and sat down before it.

"I'll not believe any of these horrible things yet awhile. It will all be explained—she'll be back presently, to laugh at me for this foolishness!"

CHAPTER X.

MATTIE IN SEARCH.

How does the time contrive to steal away from us when we are sitting up, feverish with fear for him, or her, who returns not? The dial that we stare at so often, marks fresh hours, and still further alarms us; but the night is long and tedious, and there's a stab in every tick of that sepulchral clock on the landing. We disguise our alarm from the servants, even from ourselves, and sit down patiently for the coming one—nervous at the footfalls in the streets without, and feeling heart-sick as they pass our door, and die away in the distance. We set our books and newspaper aside at last, and *wait*—we give up pretension to coolness, and watch with our hearts also.

Mattie waited, tried to hope, then to pray again; gave up wholly after three in the morning, and cried as for one lost to her for ever. There was a reasonable hope in Harriet having missed the train, or in her having been induced to stay the night at the Eveleighs'; a reasonable fear—in these times of railway mismanagement and error—of an accident having occurred to the up-train. But these hopes and fears were not Mattie's; they flashed by her once or twice, but she felt that Harriet's absence was not to be accounted for by them. At four in the morning she took the big key from the lock, put on her bonnet and shawl, and then paused on the stairs, hesitating in her mind whether to apprise Ann Packet of her new intention or not.

Ann Packet would hear a knock if Harriet returned, which was unlikely now; she would not alarm Ann, or betray her friend unnecessarily. It might be necessary, who knows? to keep this ever a secret—she could not tell, all was mystery dark and unfathomable.

"It's not a runaway match either," thought Mattie, "for there was no occasion to run away, when Harriet and her lover could have married quietly and without any opposition, at least, on *their* side. Harriet knows that, and is not a girl to be led away if she did not. Weak in many ways but not in that, I know."

Mattie disliked mystery.

"I'll follow this to the end!" she cried, with a stamp of her foot—"to the very end, if possible."

Mattie might have been spelling over a sensation novel, wherein the hero or heroine—*i.e.* the villain catcher—goes through the last two volumes on the detective principle; and it might have possibly

struck her that if the "catcher" had started earlier and gone a less roundabout way to work—certainly a bad way for the volumes!—the matter might have been more expeditiously arranged. She could always see to the end pretty clearly—why not the cute-minded party in search?

Mattie closed the street-door behind her, and went out into the cold morning. The pavement was still wet and clammy; there was no "drying air" in the streets, although the stars looked bright and aggravatingly frosty.

Mattie turned to the left at the end of Great Suffolk Street, and proceeded at a rapid pace towards the railway station; there were stragglers still in the Borough—a broad thoroughfare, that never rests, but is ever alive with sound. Life still at the great terminus; a train hissing and fuming from its long journey, a handful of passengers by the mail, a few cabmen still looking out for fares, guards full of bustle as usual, one Kent Street gamin out on business, and dodging the policeman behind a Patent Safety.

Mattie went to business at once.

"Has any accident happened on the line to-night, Sir?"

"Not any."

"What is the next train from New Cross that will reach here?"

"No train calls at New Cross till six in the morning."

"What is the next train that will leave here and call at New Cross?"

"Twenty minutes to six."

"Oh! dear."

A short spasmodic sigh, and then Mattie turned away and went back to Great Suffolk Street, opened the door, and stole cautiously up stairs to the room wherein Harriet had been sleeping. Not there—still away from home!

"If anything has happened, I must be the first to find it out," thought Mattie, descending the stairs, listening at the foot thereof, and then passing out into the street again, closing the shop-door very cautiously behind her.

She had made up her mind to walk at once to New Cross, to seek out the Eveleighs, whose address she thought that she remembered. She went on at a rapid pace, with her veil thrown back, and her face full of interest—not a woman in the streets, hurrying like herself on special missions, or lurking at street corners, but Mattie glanced at for an instant as she sped along. She was a quick walker and lost no time; after all, New Cross was not a great distance away; she was not easily tired, and once in action, her fears for Harriet went further into the distance. She began to think, almost to hope, that Harriet would be at the Eveleighs', and all would end with a wild fancy on her part, at which Harriet and she would laugh later in the day. Down the Dover Road, past the Bricklayers' Arms, and along the Old Kent Road, till the long lines of closed

shops ended in long lines of private houses, the railway station and the Royal Naval School—that model of good management, by which we recommend all directors of seedy institutions to profit.

Near the railway station Mattie found a policeman, who directed her to the particular terrace wherein the Eveleighs were located. It was nearly half-past five when she read by the light of the street lamp the name of Eveleigh on the brass plate affixed to the iron gate. With her hands upon the gate, Mattie held a council of war with herself as to the best method of procedure.

Mattie had soon arranged her plan of action; hers was a mind that jumped rapidly at conclusions—was quick to see the best way. Arousing the house would create an alarm, and if Harriet were not there—of which in her heart she was already assured—it would only set the people within talking about her. That would be to cast the first stone at her poor friend, and set the tongues of gossips wagging—that must not be! Mattie resolved to wait till some signs about the Eveleigh window blinds indicated a servant stirring in the house; she thought with a shudder of the shop in Great Suffolk Street, and the customers waiting for their papers; of Ann Packet's alarm, and Mr. Hinchford's perplexity; of the food for scandal which her absence would afford to a few inquisitive neighbours. Still all that might be easily explained, and it was only she who would receive the blame, if all turned out better than she dreamed; and if the worst were known, why, alas! her actions would readily be guessed at.

Fortune favoured Mattie in the most unromantic way that morning: the Eveleighs had resolved upon having their kitchen chimney swept at half-past five, and young Erebus, true to the minute, came round the corner with his soot-bag, went up the fore-court towards the side gate, rang the bell, and gave vent to his doleful cry. The maid-servant, however, was not prompt in her responses, and Mattie stood and watched in the distance, until the sweep, becoming impatient, rang again, and rattled with his brush against the side of the door steps. From Mattie's post of vigilance she could just make him out in the darkness—a shadowy figure, that might have represented evil to her and hers.

Presently the bolts of the side gate were withdrawn, and Mattie with hasty steps crossed the road and hurried up the path. The sweep was being admitted at that time, and a red-eyed, white-faced, sulky-looking servant-maid, of not more than sixteen years of age, was closing the door, when Mattie called to her to wait.

Surprised at this strange apparition at so early an hour, the girl waited and stared.

Mattie's plan of action would have done credit to a detective policeman; her questions seemed so wide of the mark, and kept suspicion back from her whom she loved so well. Certainly they implicated another, and drew attention to him in a marked manner; but

he was a man, and could bear it, thought Mattie, and if he were at the bottom of the mystery, there was no need to study *him*—rather to track him out and come face to face with him!

"Will you tell Mr. Darcy that I wish to speak a few words with him immediately?"

"Mr. Darcy don't live here," said the astonished servant.

"He visits here—he stayed here last night."

"No, he didn't," was the abrupt reply; "he went away at ten o'clock."

"With Miss Wesden, of course," was the apparently careless answer.

"Yes, with Miss Wesden. He never stops here."

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know; somewhere about here, I believe."

"Ask his address of your mistress," cried Mattie, becoming excited as the truth seemed to loom before her with all its horror; "I must see him!"

The servant-maid's eyes became rounder, and she gasped forth—

"I'll—I'll wake missus."

"Ask her to oblige me with Mr. Darcy's address—and please, make haste."

The servant withdrew, leaving Mattie standing in the draughty side passage, dark and dense as the fate of her whom she loved appeared to be from that day. She could hear the sweep bustling and bundling about the kitchen noisily; it seemed an age before the servant's feet came clumpeting down the stairs again.

"It's number fourteen, St. Olave's Terrace, Old Kent Road."

"Thank you."

Mattie turned away, and ran down the fore court at a rapid pace.

"Well—I *never!*" ejaculated the amazed domestic. "What's Mr. Darcy gone and done, I wonder?"

Mattie darted backward on her homeward route; her plans of action were at sea now; she only wished to know the worst, and feel the strength to face it for others' sakes, not for her own. There were an old man and an old woman to comfort in their latter days, to become a daughter to in the place of her who had been spirited away—give her strength to solace them in the deep misery upon its way.

People were stirring in the streets, although the day was dark, and the sky above still full of stars. Mattie made many inquiries, and at last found St. Olave's Terrace, a row of large, gloomy houses, of red brick. At No. 14, Mattie knocked long and vigorously, until a window was opened in the first floor, and a boy's head protruded—the unkempt head of a page.

"What's the row down there?" he shouted.

"Mr. Darcy—is he at home?"

"He ain't at home—he didn't come back last night."

"Are you sure?—are you quite sure?"

"I should think I was," replied young Impudence. "Who shall I say called—Walker?"

"No matter—no matter."

Mattie turned and hurried away again. Close upon six o'clock, and an empty cab before a public-house door. Mattie ran into the public-house, and found the cabman drinking neat gin at the bar, and bewailing the hardness of the times to the barman, who was yawning fearfully.

"Is your cab engaged?"

"Where do you want to go, Miss?" asked the cabman. "If it's Greenwich way, I've got a party to take up in five minutes time!"

"Suffolk Street, Borough. I—I don't mind what I pay to get there quickly."

"Jump in, Miss; I'll drive you there in no time."

Mattie entered the cab, the cabman mounted the box, and away they went down the Old Kent Road. The cabman had been up all night, calling at many night-houses in his route, and always taking gin with despatch and gusto. He was reckless with his whip, unmerciful to his horse, and disregardful of the cab, which he had out on hire. He was just intoxicated enough to be confidential, mysterious, and sympathising. He lowered the glass window at his back, and looked through at Mattie.

"Lor bless you! I wouldn't cry about a bit of a spree," he said, suddenly, so close to Mattie's ear, that she jumped to the other seat with affright; "if you've kep it up late, tell your missus, or your mother, that they wouldn't let you leave afore—she was young herself once, I daresay!"

"Drive on, please!—drive on!"

"I'm driving my hardest, my child—cutting off all the corners—that's only a kub-stone, don't be frightened, m'child—soon be home now. They won't say much to you, if you'll on'y tell 'em that they was young once 'emselves, and shouldn't be too hard upon a gal—that's on'y another kub-stone," he explained again, as a sudden jolting nearly brought the bottom out of the cab; "we shan't be long now—don't cry any more—I hope this here'll be a blessed warning to you!"

And suddenly becoming stern and full of reproof, he shook his head at Mattie, drew up the window, and directed his whole attention to his quadruped, which he had evidently made up his mind to cut in half between Old Kent Road and Great Suffolk Street.

At half-past six, Mattie was turning the corner of the well-known street; she looked from the cab window towards the stationer's shop. The shutters were closed still, but the news-boy was at the open door, muffled to the nose in his worsted comforter. Mattie sprung out, paid her fare, and ran into the shop, where Ann Packet, with her eyes red with weeping, rushed at her at once, and began to cry and shake her.

"Oh! Mattie, Mattie, where *have* you been?—what's the matter?"

"Nothing much—don't ask me just yet. How long have you been up?"

"I overslept myself—oh! dear, dear, dear!—and just got up in a fright—that boy skeering me so with the heels of his boots aginst the door. And oh! dear, dear, dear!—I found the shop all dark, and just let him in, and was going up to call you, when here you are—oh! where *have* you been?"

"I'll tell you presently—let me think a bit—I'm not well, Ann."

"You've been to a doctor's. Oh! my dear, my dear, what has happened to you? You came back in a cab—you've hurt yourself somehow, and I to be so unfeeling and wicked as to think that, that you'd gone out of your mind, perhaps—for you always was a strange gal, and like nobody else, wasn't you? Shall I run up stairs and wake Miss Harriet?"

"No, no—*not for the world!* Go down stairs and make haste with the coffee, Ann, please. And you boy, don't stare like that," snapped Mattie, "but take the shutters down."

Ann scuttled down stairs, forgetful of her ankles, in her excitement at the novel position of affairs; the boy took down the shutters and disclosed the cabman still before the door, carefully examining his horse, and rather evilly disposed towards himself for the damage he had done the animal and cab in his excitement. Mattie went into the parlour, where the gas burned still, and stood by the table reflecting on the end—what was to be done now?—whether it were better to keep up the mystery, to allege some reason for Harriet's absence, frame some white lie that might keep Ann Packet and Mr. Hinchford appeased, and save *her* name for a short while longer?

When the boy came staggering in with the third shutter, a new thought—a forlorn hope—suggested itself.

"Wait here and mind the shop till I come down, William," she said.

She went up stairs in her bonnet and shawl, and pushed open the door of Harriet Wesden's room. Empty and unoccupied, as she might have known, and yet which, in defiance of possibilities, she had gone up to explore again. The blind was undrawn, and the faint glimmer of the late dawning was stealing into the room, and scaring the shadows back.

Mattie gave way at the desolation of the place; and flung herself upon her knees at the bed's foot.

"Oh! my darling, God forgive you, and watch over you—oh! my darling, whom I loved more than a sister, and who is for ever—for ever—lost to me!"

"*No*—NO—Mattie!"

Mattie leaped to her feet, and with a cry scarcely human, rushed towards the speaker, who, white and trembling, opened her arms and received her on her throbbing breast. Harriet Wesden had come back again!

CHAPTER XI.

EXPLANATIONS.

Mattie shed many tears of joy at Harriet's return; she was a strong-minded young woman in her way, but the tension of nerve, and the reaction which followed it, had been too much for her, and she was, for a short while, a child in strength and self-command. For a while they had changed places, Mattie and Harriet—Mattie becoming the agitated and weak girl, Harriet remaining firm, and maintaining an equable demeanour.

"Courage, Mattie!—what have you to give way at?" she said, at last.

"There, I'm better now," said Mattie, looking up into Harriet's face, and keeping her hands upon her shoulders; "and now, will you trust in me?—tell me the whole truth—keep nothing back."

"From you—nothing!"

"And if he has been coward enough to lead you away by the snares of your affection——"

"Affection!" cried Harriet. "I hate him! Coward enough!—he is coward enough for anything that would degrade me, and villain enough to spare no pains to place me in his power. Oh! Mattie—Mattie—what had I done to make him think so meanly of me?—to lead him on to plot against me in so poor and miserable a fashion?"

"You have escaped from him?"

"Thank God, yes!"

Mattie could have cried again with joy, but Harriet's excitement recalled her to self-command—Harriet, who stood there with her whole frame quivering with passion and outraged pride—a woman whom Mattie had not seen till then.

"Mattie," she said, "that man, Maurice Darcy, thought that if I were weak enough to love him, I was weak enough to fly with him, forget my woman's pride, my father, home, honour, and fling all away for his sake. He did not know me, or understand me; my God! he did not think that there were any good thoughts in me, or he would not have acted as he did. I have been blind—I have been a fool until to-night!"

She stamped her foot upon the floor until everything in the room vibrated; she caught Mattie's inquiring, earnest looks towards her and went on again—

"You and I, Mattie, must keep this ever a secret between

us; for my sake, I am sure you will—for the sake of my good name, which that man's trickery has tarnished, however completely I have baffled him and shamed him. Mattie, he was at the Eveleighs' last night with his guilty plans matured. I had every confidence in him and his affection for me. I was off my guard, and believed that he was free from guile himself. At ten o'clock—beyond my time—I left the Eveleighs'; he was my escort to the railway station; he spoke of his love for me for the first time, and I was agitated and blinded by his seeming fervour. I told him of my promise to Sidney, and what I had done for his sake. I led him to think—fool that I was—that he had won my love long since. At the railway station he told me the story of his life—a lie from beginning to end—of his father's pride, of the secrecy with which our future marriage must be kept for a while, away from that father—talking, protesting, explaining, until the train came up, and he had placed me in the carriage."

"Ah! I see!" exclaimed Mattie.

"He followed me at the last moment, stating that he had business in London, and then the train moved on—FOR DOVER!"

"Yes, he *was* a villain and coward!" cried Mattie, setting her teeth and clenching her hands spasmodically; "go on!"

"In less than five minutes I was aware of the deception that had been practised on me. I woke suddenly to the whole truth, to my own folly in believing in this man. He would have feigned it to be a mistake at first—a mistake on his own part—and for my own safety, alone with him there, and the train shrieking along into the night, I professed to believe him, and mourned over the clumsy blunder which was taking us away from home; but I was on my guard, and my reserve, my alarm, kept him cautious. I sat cowering from him in the extreme corner of the carriage, and he sat maturing his plans, and marking out, as he thought, his way. He confessed at last that it was a deeply-laid scheme to secure what he called his happiness. He swore to be a brother to me, a faithful friend in whom every trust might be put until we were married at Calais; but the mask had dropped, and my heart, throbbing with my humiliation, had turned utterly against him. I lowered the carriage window, and sat watchful of him, knowing every word he uttered then to be a lie, and feeling that he looked upon me as a girl easily to be led astray—a shop-keeper's daughter, whose self-respect was quickly deadened, and whose vanity was sufficient to lead her on to ruin. But I bade him keep his seat away from me, and give me time to think of what he had said—time to believe in him! We were silent the rest of the way to Ashford. My throat was choking with the angry words which burned to leap forth and denounce him for his knavery—he who sat smiling at the success in store for him. At Ashford, thank God! the train stopped."

"Thank God!" whispered Mattie also.

"I opened the door suddenly, Mattie, and leaped forth like a madwoman; he followed me to the platform, when I turned upon like—like a she-wolf!" she cried, vehemently, "and denounced him for the cowardly wretch he had been to me. There were a few guards about, and one gentleman and they were my audience. I claimed their protection from the man; I told them how I had been tricked into that train and led away from home; I asked them if they had daughters whom they loved to protect me and send me back again secure from him. Mattie, I shamed him to his soul!"

"Bravo!—bravo!" cried Mattie, giving two leaps in the air in her excitement; "that's my own darling, whose heart was ever strong and true enough!"

"Only her head a little weak, and likely to be turned—eh, Mattie?" said Harriet, in a less excited strain; "well, I am sobered now for ever—and every scrap of romantic feeling has been torn to shreds. I must have been under a spell, for it seems like an evil dream now that I could ever have thought of loving that man."

"And they took your part at the station?"

"Yes,—and gave me advice, and were kind to me, and he who attempted to deceive me skulked back into the carriage, muttering a hundred excuses, which I did not hear. The gentleman who had listened to my story, and been prepared to defend me, had it been necessary, followed Mr. Darcy to the carriage, added a few stern words, and then returned to offer me advice how to proceed. He was a strange eccentric man, very harsh even with me in his speech, and disposed to preach a sermon on the warning I had had, as though I were not likely to take a lesson from my over-confidence, after all that had happened. But he was very kind in act, and meant all for my good, though he might have spared me just a little more. He consulted the railway time-tables for me, made many inquiries of the guards, whom he appeared to disbelieve, for he went back to the time-tables again; finally told me that there was no train till a quarter-past five by which I could reach home. He showed me an hotel adjacent to the station, and left me there, after again upbraiding me for my want of judgment; and at a quarter-past five—what an age it seemed before that time came round!—I left Ashford once again for home."

"And are here safe from danger—to make my heart light again with the sight of you. Well, my dear, we'll think it all an ugly dream—and shut *him* away in it for ever."

"And now—what will the world think of me?—how much of the story will it believe, Mattie?" was the scornful answer.

"What will the world know of it? You and I can keep the secret between us. Mr. Darcy will not boast of his humiliation. The old people need not be harassed and perplexed by all that has happened this night."

"No, no—all an ugly dream, as you say, Mattie," remarked Harriet; "perhaps it is best, and a woman's fame is hard to establish, on her own explanation of such a history as mine. Let it sink. I am verily ashamed of it. My blood will boil at every chance allusion that associates itself with last night. Oh! my poor, dear, truthful Sid, to think of turning away from *you* and believing in a heartless villain."

"Ah! Sidney!" exclaimed Mattie.

"Whatever happens—whatever the future may bring—that letter, Mattie, must be destroyed. It is a false statement. We must secure it and destroy it. With time before me, and the dark memory shut out, how I will love that faithful heart!"

"Trust the letter to me—trust—oh! the shop, the shop all this while!—and I haven't told you my story."

"Presently then, Mattie. I would go down now."

"Yes, I will go down. I have been very neglectful of business in my joy at seeing you again. It did not seem possible a few hours ago that all would have ended fairly like this. I am so happy—so very happy now, dear Harriet!"

She shook Harriet by both hands, kissed her once more, and even cried a little before she made a hasty dash from the room to the stairs. At the second landing, outside Mr. Hinchford's apartments, she remembered the letter—the evidence of Harriet's past romance in which Sidney Hinchford played no part.

Mattie pictured the future as very bright and glowing after this—the two who had been ever kind to her, and helped so greatly towards her better life, would come together after all, and make the best and truest couple in the world!

Mattie's training—moral training it may be called—was scarcely a perfect one. She had been taught what was honest and truthful; she was far away for ever from the old life; but the fine feelings—the sensitiveness to the *minutiæ* of goodness—were wanting just then. The means to the end were not particularly to be studied, so that the end was good. Harriet had done no wrong, merely had been duped by a specious scamp for a while; but keep the story dark for the sake of the suspicions it cast on minds inclined to doubt good in anything—and for the sake of general peace, make away with the letter—Sidney Hinchford's property as much as the locket she stole from him when she was eleven years of age.

Harriet Wesden was silent from fear and shame; her nature was a timid one, and shrank back from painful avowals; Mattie did not look at the subject in the best light, and thought of promoting happiness by secrecy, a dangerous experiment, that may tend at any moment to an explosion. Mattie opened the drawing-room door softly and looked in. Mr. Hinchford had not appeared yet, and she entered and went direct to the mantelpiece, on which the letter had laid ever since its arrival. The letter was gone!

"Oh! dear!—oh! dear!—what's to be done now?" cried Mattie, looking from the centre table to the side table on which was Sidney's desk, unlocked. Mattie did not think of appearances when she opened the desk and began turning over its contents with a hasty hand—a suspicious-looking operation, in which she was discovered by Mr. Hinchford, who entered the room suddenly.

"Mattie," he said, sternly, "I should not have thought that you would have been guilty of this meanness."

Mattie, with her bonnet and shawl on, and awry from her past movements, with her face pale and haggard from want of sleep, remained with her hands in the desk, looking hard at the new comer. Her instinct was to tell the truth—there was no harm in it.

"I am looking for the letter which came for Mr. Sidney—I want it back."

"Want it back!—what letter?"

"The letter which has been on the mantelpiece all the week—it was Miss Harriet's—she wishes to have it back, to put something else in it."

"Bless my soul!—very odd," said Mr. Hinchford; "I'll give it to Miss Harriet myself—there's no occasion to rummage my boy's desk about. I don't like it, Mattie—I am extremely displeased."

"I am very sorry," said Mattie, submissively; "I did not think what I was doing. And you will give the letter to Miss Harriet?"

"It's in the breast-pocket of my coat—I'll give it her."

Mattie cowered before the flushed face, and the stern look thereon; this man was a friend of hers, too—one of the rescuers!—whom she would always bear in kind remembrance; she went softly across the room to the door, veering suddenly round to lay her hands upon his arm.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Hinchford," she said; "it was all done without a moment's thought. You for the first time in your life will not be angry with me?"

"No, no, no, no," repeated the old gentleman, taken aback by this appeal, and softening at once; "I don't suppose you meant anything wrong, Mattie."

"Thank you."

Mattie went down stairs in a better frame of mind, and yet ashamed at having been detected in a crooked action by a gentleman who always spoke so much of straightforwardness, and had a son who excelled in that difficult accomplishment. She was vexed at the impulse now—what would any man less generous in his ideas have thought of her?

"Never mind," was Mattie's consolation, "I meant no harm I meant well. And all will end well now, and everybody be so

happy. What a change from the terrible thoughts of only a few hours ago!"

She could think of nothing but Harriet Wesden's safety, and her own minor *escapade* was of little consequence. Thinking of Harriet again, and rejoicing in the brighter thoughts which the last hours had brought with it, she opened the door at the foot of the stairs and went at once into the shop.

Mr. Wesden was standing behind the counter, waiting on a customer, as though he had never left Great Suffolk Street, and retiring from business had been only a dream.

CHAPTER XII.

A SHORT WARNING.

MATTIE stood in her disordered walking-dress, gazing at the stationer, for whose presence she could not account; Mr. Wesden looked across the counter at her.

"Will you go into the parlour, please?" he said at last.

"In the parlour!—ye—es, Sir."

There was something wrong—radically and irretrievably wrong this time; however greatly Mr. Wesden had changed, he had never looked so strangely or spoken so harshly as he did at that time. Even the customer whom he was serving, and who knew Mattie, turned round and glanced also in her direction.

"Robbery!—there—there's been no more robbery!" gasped Mattie, her thoughts darting off at a tangent in the direction of her old trouble.

"You can go into the parlour," he repeated, as harshly as before; "I'll be with you in a minute."

Mattie went into the parlour, took off the bonnet and shaw that she had so long forgotten, and which must have added to Mr. Wesden's perplexity, and then sat down, with her face towards the shop, to await her master's pleasure—and displeasure! There was trouble in store for her—perhaps for Harriet—Mr. Wesden had discovered a great deal, and she had to bear the first shock of the storm. She could see Mr. Wesden's face from her position; even at that

distance it seemed as if the innumerable lines in it had been cut deeper since she had seen it last, and the heavy grey brows shadowed more completely the eyes. He was not his usual self either—the quick glance of the watcher noticed how his hands shook as he served the customer, and that he fumbled with the change in a manner very knew and uncharacteristic for him. His habits or his caution, had even undergone a change; for, as the news-boy came in at the street-door, he told him to go behind the counter and attend to the customers till he returned. Then he entered the parlour, still flushed and trembling, yet so stern, and leaned his two hands on the table till it creaked beneath the pressure which he put upon it.

"Mattie," he said at last, "I think it's quite time that you and I said good-bye to one another!"

"Oh! Sir!—*what?*" Mattie could only ejaculate.

"I've been thinking it over for some time—putting it off—giving you another trial—hoping that I was even mistaken in you—but things get worse and worse, and this last news *is* a settler!"

"Mr. Wesden, there must be some mistake."

"No, there isn't—don't interrupt me—don't make any more excuses, for I shan't believe 'em."

"Go on, Sir," said Mattie, impetuously, "I don't understand."

"You need not fly into a passion if you don't," he corrected.

"I'm not in a passion, Mr. Wesden—you *will* think wrongly of me."

"Just listen to this—just deny this if you can. You left my house in the middle of the night—you have been up all night, and God knows where—you did not come back to this house—you, who have no friends to go to—until half-past six o'clock this morning."

Mattie sat thunderstruck at this charge, so true in its assertion, and yet the suspicions which it led to so easily refuted, or—she drew a long breath and held her peace at the thought—so easily transferred!

"You can't deny this," continued Mr. Wesden, in the same hard manner; "how long it's been going on, or what bad company has led you astray, I can't say. But you haven't acted like a young woman who meant well—you've been getting worse and worse with every day."

"It isn't true!" cried Mattie, indignantly; "I——"

She paused again.

"Ah! don't give me excuses," he said; "I'm an old man who knows the world, and won't believe in them. I wouldn't believe in my own daughter, if she acted as you have done, or was ever so ready at excuses. No honest girl—I'm sorry to say it, Mattie—would ever, without a fair reason, be walking the streets, friendless and alone, at such unnatural hours."

"Will you not believe me, when I tell you truly, without a blush

in my face, that as God's my judge, I went out with a motive of which even you would approve?"

"What was it?"

"I—I cannot tell you that yet. Presently, perhaps—if you will only give me time—not now."

Mr. Wesden shook his head.

"Mattie," he replied, "it won't do! It isn't what I've been used to, and I can't wait till you have invented a story and——"

"Invented!" shrieked Mattie, leaping to her feet, "what more! —what more have you to charge an innocent girl, who has thought of nothing but serving you honestly from the time you took pity on her wretchedness? You have turned against me; if you are tired of me, tell me so plainly—but don't talk as if I were a liar and a thief still—I will not have it!"

"You put a bold face upon it, and that's a bad sign," said Mr. Wesden; where there's no shame, only *bounce*, it takes away all the pity of the thing, and makes me firmer."

The table creaked once more with the extra pressure of his hands, the flush died away from the face, whereon settled an expression more steely and invulnerable.

"Oh! Sir—how you have altered! What do you think that I have done?" cried the perplexed Mattie.

"See here," said Mr. Wesden; "I don't wish to rake up everything, but as you put it to me, I'll just show you how foolish it is to brave it out like this. I'm very sorry; I can't make it out, altering for the better as you had—it's bad company, I suppose. First," he removed his hands from the table, and began checking off the items on his fingers, "there's money missing up stairs—a cash-box opened, and only——"

"My God! has that thought rankled so long?" interrupted Mattie; "I don't wonder at the rest, if you begin like that with me. I'll go away—I'll go away!"

"It didn't rankle; I gave you the benefit of the doubt," said Mr. Wesden. "I wouldn't believe it, but I fancied that you were altering, and that something was wrong somewhere. It looked at least as if you were careless, and I thought the house might get robbed, or catch fire, or anything after that—and it disturbed my mind much; I couldn't sleep for thinking of you—and one night I came over here very late, and you were up talking and laughing with a young man in the shop, in the dead of night."

"That, too!" cried Mattie; "do you suspect *him?*"

"I suspected *you*,—that's enough to say just now."

"More than enough!" was the bitter answer.

"And then a parcel disappears, and there's a lame excuse for that —and a policeman finds you in Kent Street at a receiver's house —the house of a noted thief, that you must have known long ago——"

"I went there—but no matter, you'll not believe me," said Mattie.

"And so I was obliged to have you watched for my own protection's sake, and you were seen to leave the house last night, and come back in a cab after the shop was open. And if all that's not enough to drive a business man wild, why, I never was a man fit for business at all."

Mattie gathered up her bonnet and shawl from the chair on which they had been placed, and proceeded to put them on again, keeping her dark eyes fixed on Mr. Wesden's face.

"There's only one thing which I'll agree with, Sir," she said, her voice faltering, despite her effort to keep firm, "and that's the first speech you made me. It's quite time that you and I said 'good-bye' to one another!"

"Well—it is!"

"I don't know whether you wish it or not—I don't care!—but I will go away at once, trusting in Him whom your wife taught me first to pray to. I will go away without anger in my heart against you—for oh! you have been very good and kind to me, and I shall be grateful again when to-day's hard words go further and further back. I will hope in the time when you will know all, and be sorry that you lost your trust in me so soon. Better to doubt me than—*others*."

She corrected herself in time; she remembered her promise to Harriet. She saw how easy it was for a few errors, a few mistakes, to make this strange man forget all the good efforts of a life—deceived in Mr. Wesden, as she had been, she could not gauge in those excited moments the depths of his affection for his daughter.

In the avowal there would be danger to Harriet; so, for Harriet's sake, let her take the blame and go away. Harriet could only have cleared up the last mystery—the rest affected herself. She had had never more than half a character—she rose from crime, and its antecedents rose again with her at the first suspicion against her truthful conduct. It was very hard to go away, but it was her only step, and he wished it also—he, who had been almost a father to her until then.

"I'll pack my box and leave at once, Sir, if you don't mind."

"No," was the gloomy response.

He was deceived in Mattie still; he had hoped that she would have confessed to everything, to the new and awful temptations that had beset her lately, and prayed for his mercy and forgiveness—begged for his help and moral strength to lead her from the dark road she was pursuing. He was disappointed by her defiance—by her assumption of an innocence in which he could not believe; and he could only see that her plans were too readily formed, and that she had already fixed upon her future associates and home. He was

amazed at her way of encountering his charges; and as he had been only a business-man all his life, he could not understand her.

Mattie left the room, and he turned into his shop again, and dismissed the news-boy from his post of promotion. The matter had worried him, and was still worrying him. The *dénouement* was not satisfactory, and the world was hardening very much, or becoming too complex in its machinery for him. He had found Mattie out, and it had all ended just as he feared it would; and still his head ached, and his thoughts perplexed him!

He counted the arrears of Mattie's salary, and put it on the back shelf, ready for her when she came down, knocking it all over the minute afterwards, and sending two shillings under the shop-board, where the shutters and gas-meter were. He made mistakes with the next customer in his change, and would not believe it was his error, although he paid the man rather than get into a fresh dispute at that instant; he rummaged from a whole packet of printed notices he dealt in, a "THIS SHOP AND BUSINESS TO BE DISPOSED OF," and stuck it with wafers in the window, upside down. He would retire from business in earnest, and not make-believe any longer; he should be more composed in mind—more happy, when all this was no longer a burden to him.

He served his customers absently, and wondered—for he was a good and just man at heart—whether he was acting for the best after all; whether it was quite Christian-like to give up the child whom he had rescued from the cruel streets five years ago, come Christmas.

CHAPTER XIII.

LEAVE-TAKINGS.

MATTIE went to her room and packed her box with trembling hands. She was very agitated still; there were many conflicting thoughts to disturb her natural equanimity. Regret at going away from the home wherein had begun her better life; indignation at the false accusations that had been made against her, and made in so hard and uncharitable a fashion; doubts of the future stretching be-

fore her, impenetrable and dusky, and the life to begin again in some way, to which she tried to give a thought, even in those early moments, and failed in utterly.

Over her box came honest Ann Packet to ask the latest news—to stare in a vague idiotic way when told it.

"I am going away, Ann—don't you understand?"

"Going away?—no, I don't yet. Going where did you say, Mattie?"

"Going away from here, where I am no longer wanted, where I am suspected of being all that is vile and wrong. Going away for good!"

"Oh! my gracious—not that! Because of last night—because of——"

"Many things, Ann, which I dare not explain, and which, if explained, perhaps, would not be believed in by—*him*. But you, Ann,—what will you think of me when I'm gone, and they say behind my back how justly I was served?"

"I say?—I say?"

"You'll hear *their* story, and I can't tell you mine. I can only say that since I have been here there's not a bad thought had a place in my mind, and not a good one which I did not try, for *their* sakes, as well as my own, to cling to. I can only ask you, Ann—you who have always thought well of me—to keep your faith strong, for poor Mattie's sake."

Ann Packet gave vent to a howl at this—wrung her fat red hands together, and then fell upon Mattie's box, as though our heroine had shot her.

"You shan't pack up no more!" she screamed; "you can speak to them as to me, and they'll believe you, or they're made of stone. Why, it's a dreffful shame to turn you off like this, as though you'd been found out in all that's bad."

"Hush! you'll wake Miss Harriet, I daresay she—she's asleep still!—you will go now, Ann, please. I'm not unhappy—why, here's one to begin with who will always think the best of *me!*"

"The very best—as you've been the very best and the goodest to me, who used to snap you so at first, and feel jealous like, because they put you over me—but you won't mind that now?"

"No—no."

"And, Mattie, you don't want to go away and see nobody anymore—to be quite alone and hear nothing of anybody? I may come and see you?"

"Yes—to be sure."

"And you'll write and tell me directly where you are?"

"Ah! where I am. Yes, you shall know that first. And when I can prove to him that I have always been honest and true, I'll see him and his again, *not before*."

"And I shall call and tell you all the news—listen at all the keyholes to hear what they've got to talk about."

"I hope not. But get up now, Ann, and go down stairs, or they'll suspect something. I'll send for the box presently, when I'm settled."

Ann rose with clenched hands and swollen eyes.

"If I had the settling of *him!* I—I almost feel to hate him. He's a brute!"

And before Mattie had time to reprove the faithful Ann for the outburst, Miss Packet had left the room, and gone down stairs to cry afresh over the breakfast she had to prepare for Mr. Hinchford.

Mattie passed into the other room, and found Harriet Wesden asleep, as she had fancied. The toil of yesternight, the excitement and suspense, had brought their reaction, and Harriet had flung herself, dressed as she was, upon the bed, where she had dropped off into slumber.

Mattie stood for a moment irresolute whether to wake her or no; had it been simply to say "good-bye," she would have hesitated longer, though she might have awakened her at last.

"Harriet—Harriet!" she whispered, as she bent over her.

The fair girl started up and looked at Mattie.

"What's happened now, dear?"

"Nothing very important," said Mattie, who had determined how to proceed. "I have been thinking of our next step together concerning last night. Your father is down stairs."

"Oh! he must not know it—he must never know it!" exclaimed Harriet; "he is weaker in mind—more excitable, suspicious—what would he think of me, keeping the name of Maurice Darcy from him all my life?"

"Harriet, promise me never to tell him—I am not frightened at the truth, but of their perversion of it, destroying for ever your good name—promise me!"

"But why promise *you*, who——"

"Promise it. I am very, very anxious, for your own sake and for mine."

"I promise—I promise faithfully."

"Whatever happens?"

"Yes—whatever happens!"

"I will tell you why, now. In the first place, I have found out that the world will never accept *your* statement, but believe the very worst of you."

Harriet shuddered; her own trustfulness in others—her vanity, perhaps, allied thereto—had led her to the verge of the abyss—and "miraculous escapes" are only for penny-a-liners, and romancists. She thought that Mattie was right in binding her solemnly to secrecy, and she repeated her promise even more solemnly than before.

"And in the second place——"

Mattie paused; she recoiled from the explanation, the trial of another parting with this girl for whose happiness she was about to sacrifice herself, and the good name for which she had struggled. Harriet looked ill and worn now, and she could not tell her all the news, her heart was too full.

"I would bathe my hands and face, and go down stairs as soon as possible. It will prevent suspicion, and you *must* stand up against the fatigue for a while."

"Yes, yes, I can do that."

"Nothing can be helped now by confession; remember *that* when the truth would leap to your lips in a generous impulse, of which hereafter you would be sorry. Good-bye now."

Mattie stooped and kissed her—the quivering lips, the tear-brimming eyes, suggested a new trouble, and Harriet detected it at once.

"There is something new, Mattie—don't deceive me!"

"Very little—you will know all when you get down stairs—be on your guard—God bless you!"

And Mattie, feeling her voice deserting her, hurried away. She went at once to Mr. Hinchford's room. Mr. Hinchford was becoming fidgety about his breakfast, and walking up and down discontentedly.

"They'll tell me I'm late again," he was muttering, when Mattie, *sans cérémonie*, made her appearance.

"Mr. Hinchford, will you let Miss Harriet have that letter at once? She's waiting for it."

"And I'm waiting for my breakfast, Mattie—it's really too bad!"

"I'll tell Ann; and—and the letter?"

"You're an odd girl; I'll get it you."

He went into the next room, returning with a letter in his hand.

"There!"

Mattie dashed at it in her impatience, and tore it into twenty pieces, which she thrust into the pocket of her dress, lest a fragment of the news should remain as evidence of Harriet Wesden's want of judgment.

"I say, my girl, that's not your letter, it's——"

"It's better torn to pieces. Harriet wished it, Sir."

"She—she hasn't had a quarrel with my boy?"

"No, Sir, to be sure not."

"I wonder how much longer he will be; there's—there's nothing further to break to an old man by degrees, Mattie?"

"Nothing further. I have a little news to tell you about myself, that I hope you'll be sorry to hear."

Mr. Hinchford's face assumed that perplexed look to which it had become prone of late years. Still he was not likely to be very much troubled—it was only about Mattie!

"I'm going away from here," Mattie explained in a hurried manner. "Mr. Wesden will tell you the whole story, and it's not to my credit, looking at it in his light. You'll believe it, perhaps?" she added, wistfully.

"Mr. Wesden is not accustomed to exaggeration, Mattie; but I will not believe anything that is wrong of you."

"I hope you will not, however proof may seem to go against me," was the sad remark; "he thinks I'm wrong, and I dare not explain part, and cannot explain the rest, and so I'm going away this morning."

"This morning!"

Mr. Hinchford took a good haul of his stock at this.

"He don't wish me to stop, and I would not if he did," said Mattie, proudly, "so we are both of one mind about my going. And now, Sir," holding out both hands to him, "try and think the best of me—never mind the desk this morning, that was nothing, remember—*do* think well of one who will never forget you, and all the kindness you have shown me since I have been here."

"Mattie, let me go down, and see if I can't set all this straight," said the old gentleman, moved by Mattie's appeal.

"It could not be done, Sir," said Mattie in reply; "you're very kind, but I know how much better it is to go. Why, Sir, I have a great hope that they'll think better of me when I am gone!"

"But—but——"

"And so good-bye, Sir."

The old gentleman shook both her hands, stooped suddenly and kissed her on the forehead.

"I can't make it all out, but I'll believe the best, Mattie."

"Thank you—thank you."

The tears were blinding her, so she hastened to the door, pausing there to add—

"Tell Mr. Sidney—oh! tell him above all—to think of me, as I would think of him, whatever the world said and whoever was against him. Harriet will speak up for me when he has a doubt of my honesty, and he will believe her. Don't let my past life stand between you all and your better thoughts of me—good-bye."

Mattie was gone; she had closed the door behind her, and shut in Mr. Hinchford, who forgot his breakfast for a while in the sudden news that had been communicated. He was forgetful at times now; his memory, though he did not care to own it, would betray him when he least expected it. In the midst of his reverie, a flash of a new recollection took away his breath, and brought his hand again to his inflexible stock.

"Good Heaven!—not that letter, I hope."

He bustled into the back room, and searched nervously in the pockets of coats, waistcoats, and trousers about there. A blank expression settled on his countenance as he drew from the side-pocket of the great coat he had worn yesternight, another letter—the letter which Mattie had demanded, and he thought that he had given her.

"God bless me! she's torn up the letter that was given me to post last night!"

He made a dash down stairs, but Mattie had gone, and the double mistake could not be rectified.

Mattie had made her final leave-taking by that time. She had gone straight from Mr. Hinchford's apartments into the shop, taking up her position on the street-side of the counter facing Mr. Wesden.

"I'm—I'm ready to go now, Sir!"

"Very well. I—I didn't mean you to go in such a hurry; but as you have looked upon it in that light, why I can't stop you. There's your salary up to the month."

He took it from the little back-shelf and laid it on the counter; Mattie hesitated for a moment; her face crimsoned, and there was an impulsive movement to sweep the money to the floor, checked by a second and better thought.

"Thank you, Sir."

The money was dropped into her pocket; she looked steadily at Mr. Wesden meanwhile.

"I shall send for my box when I've found a home," she said. "Let the man take it without being watched; some of you might like to know what has become of me, and I don't wish that yet awhile."

"Where do you think of going?"

"Anywhere I can be trusted," was the unintentional retort. "I am not particular, and I have a hope that God will send a friend to me. I think of going from here to Camberwell to bid one friend good-bye, at least—what do you think, Sir?"

"You had better not. She's ill."

"You never said that before!" cried Mattie. "Ill and alone!"

"Harriet will return home when she gets up—she is just ill enough to be kept very quiet."

"I'll not go to her, then."

Mattie still fixed her dark eyes on Mr. Wesden; that steady, unflinching gaze was making the stationer feel uncomfortable.

"I don't know that there is anything else to say," said Mattie, after a long pause; "and I suppose—you've nothing else to say to me?"

"Nothing. Except," he added, after another pause on his part, "that I hope you will take care of yourself—that this will be a lesson to you."

Mattie coloured once more, and took time to reply.

"I would part friends with *you*," she said at last. "I have been trying hard to bear everything that you say, remembering past kindness. *You* saved me at the eleventh hour, when I was going back to ruin—*you* taught me what was good, and made this place my home; for *you* and *yours* I would do anything in the world that lay in my power. BUT!" she cried, her face kindling and her eyes flashing, "if it had been anyone else who had spoken to me as you have done, who had cast such cruel slander at me, and believed in nothing but my vileness, I—I think I should have killed him!"

Mr. Wesden had never seen Mattie in a passion before; her frenzy alarmed him, and he backed against the drawers behind him lest she should attempt some mischief. His confidence in the righteousness of his cause was more shaken also; but he did not know how to express it, having been ever a man whose ideas came slowly.

"Up stairs, a little while ago, Mr. Wesden," continued Mattie, "I thought that we were quits with each other—that casting me back to the streets made amends for the rescue from them years ago. I thought almost that I could afford to hate you—but you must forgive me that—I was not myself then! I know better now; and if I go back alone and friendless, still I take with me all the good thoughts which the latter years have given me, and no misfortune is likely to rob me of."

"But—but——"

"But this is strange talk in a woman who cannot account for missing property, and keeps out all night," said Mattie; "you can't think any better of me now—some day you will. Good-bye, Sir—may I shake hands with you?"

"I—I don't bear any malice, Mattie. I—I wish you well, girl," he stammered, as he held forth his hand.

Mattie's declamation had cowed him, softened him. He was the man of the past, who had faith in her, and whom late events had not changed so much. He thought it might be a mistake just then—he did not know—he understood nothing—his brain was in a whirl.

Mattie shook hands with him, and then went away without another word. Outside in the streets the traffic was thickening—it was Saturday morning, when people sought the streets in greater numbers. Mattie's slight form was soon lost in the surging stream of human life; Mr. Wesden, who had followed her to the door, noticed how soon she was submerged.

Five years ago he had taken her from the streets—a stray. Again in her womanhood, at his wish, he had cast her back to them a stray still—nothing more!

A stray whom no one would claim as child, sister, friend; who went away characterless in a world ever ready to believe the worst.

She had spoken of her strength to do battle now alone, but she did not know with what enemies she had to fight, or what deadly weapons to encounter; watching her from that shop door, she looked little more than the child God had once prompted him to save.

He could have run after her again, as in the old times, and cried "Stop!"—he could have taken her to his heart again, and began anew with her, sinking the incomprehensible bygones for ever.

But he moved not; and Mattie, the stray, drifted from his home, and went away to seek her fortunes.

END OF THE THIRD BOOK.

BOOK IV.

"WANT PLACES."

CHAPTER I.

"ONE-AND-TWENTY."

MATTIE'S box was fetched away from Great Suffolk Street; the man who called for it brought a note to Ann Packet, which she found a friend to read for her later in the day. It did not furnish Ann Packet with her address—"When I am settled, Ann," she promised, quoting her words on that morning of departure, "and I am very unsettled yet awhile."

Poor Ann Packet, who had looked forward to paying sundry flying visits to Mattie, and upon spending her holiday once a month with her, mourned over this evasion of Mattie's—"Won't she trust even in me, or think of me a bit?" she said.

In Mattie's letter was enclosed a smaller one to Harriet Wesden, who understood the *coup d'état* which had ensued by that time, and was agitated and unhappy concerning it. This was Mattie's letter to Harriet Wesden, *in extenso*:—

"Keep your promise, dearest Harriet—never forget that your happiness, and that of others, depend upon it. Do not think that I have taken the blame or am a victim—it is not only for my actions of that night that I have gone away. Sooner or later, it must have come. God bless you!—I hope to see you again soon. Your letter to Sidney is destroyed."

Harriet pondered over this missive. For weeks she became more thoughtful, and aroused fresh anxiety in her father—for weeks went

on an unknown and fierce struggle to break away from her promise and tell all.

She had been afraid of the revelation, and what would be said and thought about it; she had seen her innocence construed as half-consent, and herself set down as an accomplice in Mr. Darcy's plot; she had feared of losing the esteem and confidence of all who now respected her. But when Mattie had been sent away for keeping out all night—and though she had not heard the story, she guessed of whom Mattie had been in search—her sense of justice, her love for Mattie, led her more than once to the verge of the revelation. Keeping her own secret was one thing, but the blame to rest on another was very different, and despite her promise—into which she had been entrapped as it were—the avowal was ever trembling on her lips.

After all, it was but the truth to confess—her father and mother would believe her; and if Sidney Hinchford turned away, why surely there was nothing to grieve at in that—she could not have loved Sidney, or that letter would never have been written to him! And yet let it be recorded here, Harriet Wesden's main incentive to keep her secret close was for Sidney Hinchford's sake. It tortured her to think that she should have ever entertained one feeling of love or liking for the Mr. Darcy who had sought her humiliation; the shock to her pride had not only turned her utterly away from Mr. Darcy, but the very contrast he presented to young Hinchford, had aroused the old, or given birth to a new affection for the latter.

She valued Sidney Hinchford at his just due at last; she understood his patience, energy, and love; how he had been working for her from his boyhood, and what would have been the effect to him of losing her. She had made up her mind, when he returned, to give him all her heart, and sustain him by her love against those secret cares which lately had been shadowing him. She believed that her secret was for ever shut away from the light—but keeping it under lock and key would be better for Sidney, whose trust in her was so implicit. He had always believed in her devotion to himself; why should she break in upon that dream, now she felt that all girlish follies were over with her, and she had become a staid woman, whose hope was to be his wife?

She was consoled by Mattie's letter: "It is not only for my actions of that night that I have gone away. Sooner or later it must have come."

Mattie, ever a deep thinker, considered it best also—by her confession, even Mattie would be unhappy; so Harriet kept her secret for everybody's sake, and made her last mistake in life. Mattie and she had both regarded the subject from a narrow point of view, and were wrong; the best intentioned people are wrong sometimes, and from young women, with their heads disturbed

concerning young men, we do not anticipate the judgment of Solomon.

Harriet Wesden felt secure—knowing not of the letter in Mr. Hinchford's coat, of Mr. Hinchford's mistake and Mattie's. And yet the chances were now against the revelation, thanks to the treacherous memory of the old gentleman. He had mentioned his error in the counting-house to his employers the same day, and met with a reprimand and a supercilious shrug of the shoulders—"It was like old Hinchford," one partner muttered to another, and there the subject ended for a while. Mr. Hinchford went home, resolving to restore the letter to Harriet Wesden, took the letter from his pocket and put it on the bed-room mantelpiece, to keep the matter in his remembrance until he saw Harriet again.

There for two days the letter remained, till Ann Packet in dusting the room knocked it on the floor, picked it up and placed it on the dressing-glass, where Mr. Hinchford found it, and rather absently shut it in the looking-glass drawer, as a safe place; and then the letter passed completely out of recollection, there being a great deal to trouble his mind just then.

For they were not kind to him at his business, expected too much from him, and made no allowance for an old servant; and above all, and before all, the boy's birthday was drawing near—it was three days before Harriet Wesden's—and there was no sign of Sidney Hinchford on his way towards him.

By that time Mr. Wesden had found a customer for his business, which was to change hands early in February; and in February what would become of him, and whither should he go himself? thought Mr. Hinchford. Good gracious! he would have to change his residence, and his son perhaps never be able to find him! A horrid thought, which only lasted till he thought of his son's business address, but *whilst* it lasted, a trying one.

When the birthday of Sidney Hinchford came round in January, the father grew excited; talked of his son at business all day, and worried the clerks about his son's accomplishments; returned in the evening to harass Mr. Wesden, always at his post behind the counter, for the few more days remaining of his business life.

"I have brought a bottle of wine home with me in the hope of the lad's return," said Mr. Hinchford, placing that luxury on the counter; "his one and twentieth year must not pass without our wishing *bon voyage* to his manhood. You and I, Mr. Wesden, will at least drink his health to-night."

"Very well."

"I'll come and keep you company after tea, in the back parlour, Wesden, and we'll have a long talk about my boy and your girl. There should have been a formal betrothal to-night, with much rejoicing afterwards. To think of his being one and twenty to-day, and away from us!"

"It must seem odd to you. Perhaps he'll come back to-night."

"That's what I have been thinking, Wesden. I fancy if he were near his return journey he would make a push for it to-night, knowing the old father's wishes. I fancy, do you know, that if I had been your daughter——"

"Well—what of her?"

"If I had been Harriet, I should have remembered this day, and looked in for a few moments."

"Her mother don't grow stronger; she is fidgety when she is away, and the servant we have is not of much use."

"Then Harriet might have written, wishing him many happy returns of the day, or have come to congratulate me upon having such a son grown to man's estate."

Having expressed this opinion, Mr. Hinchford went up stairs to the tea which Ann Packet had prepared for him—spent an hour after tea in putting the room to rights, opening Sidney's desk and lighting the table-lamp at the side thereof.

"Now, if he come home, and there's work to be done—and if it's to be done, his one-and-twentieth birthday will not stop it—there's everything ready to begin!"

He went down stairs to join Mr. Wesden in the parlour—the news-boy was perched on the chair in the shop, keeping guard over the goods that night—and found Harriet Wesden seated at the fireside.

"Why, it's all coming true," cried the old gentleman, seizing both hands of Harriet, and shaking them up and down, "and he's coming home!"

"Have you thought so, too?" asked Harriet.

"Well, I have hoped so, at all events; and it seems as if we were waiting for him now, and he *must* come. But don't talk too much about that, please," he said, with his characteristic tug at his stock, "or I shall feel as if something had happened when he keeps away. But we'll drink the boy's health, at all events, God bless him! and we'll have a game at whist, three and a dummy, and make quite a party of it in our little way. Sid one-and-twenty, Wesden! by all that's glorious it's a fine thing to have a son come to maturity!"

Wine glasses were produced—even a pack of cards, a bran new pack from the stock—and Sid's health was drunk very quietly, without any musical honours, but very heartily for all that.

And five minutes after the health had been drunk, Sidney Hinchford, portmanteau in hand, entered the shop, and walked straight into the parlour.

"I said he'd come!" exclaimed the father. "Many happy returns of the day, you runaway! God bless you, my boy, and grant you health and happiness!"

He wound up his wishes by kissing him as though he had been a girl. Sidney blushed, and laughed at his father's impulsiveness, and

then turned to his two remaining friends with whom he shook hands —we need not add with whom the longer time.

"Finish your game at whist," he said; "I must not spoil the harmony of the evening. Here, shall I take dummy?"

"If you like. But we want to know——"

"Presently you shall know all—let us relapse into our old positions, just as if I had never been away, for a while. How's Mattie—where is she?"

All three looked somewhat blankly at him. Mattie's departure, and the reasons which had actuated it, were more or less a mystery, and difficult of explanation.

Mr. Wesden acted as spokesman.

"I am sorry to say she has gone away under very disagreeable circumstances."

"Gone away!—Mattie!"

"Your father can tell you all about it some other time," said Mr. Wesden. "I don't think we need spoil the evening by a long, sad story."

"Yes, but, dash it! disagreeable circumstances," said Sidney—"that's an awkward phrase and don't sound affectionate. But, until to-morrow, we'll postpone all details. I'll take dummy and be your partner, Harriet."

"Very well."

He did not know whether it were better to be Harriet's partner, or to be her father's, and sit by Harriet's side—that matter had always perplexed him the few times he had played at whist with them. It seemed somewhat strange his playing at whist at all that night—his arriving from a long journey, tired and travel-worn, as evident from his looks, and immediately sitting down to cards, as though there were an infatuation in the game, which under no circumstances it was in his power to resist. Harriet Wesden thought it strange at least, and now and then furtively regarded him. He played whist well, as he did everything well he undertook—but his heart was not in the game, and more than once, as he held the cards, close to his classes, in the old near-sighted fashion, Harriet fancied that the face assumed a troubled expression. The game at whist was over at last, and with it Sidney Hinchford's power of endurance.

"Now that is over, I think I'll tell you a story. I don't know three people in the world so well entitled to have the first hearing of it. I'll ask you, Sir," turning to his father, "to give me courage, and see that I do not give way?"

Mr. Hinchford senior stared, as well he might, at this—it placed him in a new position, and braced his nerves accordingly. Sidney had resolved upon these tactics on his homeward route; there was no chance of breaking *his* news gradually—the world would be talking of it ere morning.

"I always hated dodging a truth," said Sidney, sturdily; "it's a bad habit, and don't answer. It's sneaking—isn't it, Mr. Wesden?"

"Well—yes."

"If there's good luck coming, go to meet it—if there's disappointment, which you can't avoid, let it meet you, and not find you hiding away from the inevitable. Why, that's like a baby!"

"To be sure it is," said the father; "wait a moment; I'm not a bit nervous about this; I'll see that you keep firm, my boy, but I'll just unfasten this buckle behind my neck a moment. Now, then!"

"When I was one-and-twenty, there seemed reason to believe in a partnership in my masters' firm—my masters took a fancy to me when I was a lad, and very much obliged to them I was for it. By that hope in prospective," suddenly turning to Harriet Wesden, and leaning over the table towards her with a very anxious look upon his face, "I was led, Harriet, to think too much of you—to enter into a half-engagement, or a whole one, or a something that kept me ever thinking of you, hoping for you. When I was one-and-twenty, I was to come to your father, and say, 'I am in a good position of life—may I consider Harriet as my future wife?'—he was to refer me to you if satisfied with my prospects, and you were—well, I did hope very much that you were then to say, 'Yes,' in real earnest. All this, a pretty story, foolish for me to believe in—but a story ended now in an ugly fashion. Mr. Wesden," veering suddenly round to the stationer, "my prospects in life are infamously bad; my employers are bankrupts, and my services will not be required after this day month!"

Mr. Hinchford flung himself back in his chair with a crash that brought the top rail off,—Sidney turned at once to him, and laid his hand upon his arm.

"With my father to give me courage, I can bear this!"

"That's—that's—that's well, my lad. Keep strong—oh! Lord have mercy upon us!—keep strong, my boy!"

"I have been fighting hard to get the firm straight—I have been abroad to the foreign branch, working night and day there, my last chance and my employers'. I had a hope once of success, till the markets fell suddenly, and swamped everything; our weakness could not stand against anything new and unforeseen, and so we—*smashed!* It will be all over town to-morrow—but it was a good fight whilst it lasted."

"It's very unfortunate news," said Mr. Wesden.

"I'm not afraid for myself," said Sidney, proudly; "I think that with time, and health—ah! I must not forget that—I shall work my way somewhere, and to something in good time. But I shan't climb to greatness all of a sudden; and it may happen that at forty—even

fifty years of age—I may be no better off than I am now. That I'm disappointed is natural enough, for I know money's value, and perhaps it was a little too near my heart, and this is my lesson; but the disappointment of losing you, Harriet—of giving up that chance, as any honourable man should—is the one loss which staggers me, and will be the hardest to surmount. I thought that I would make a clean breast of it, and begin my one-and-twentieth year free, as land-agents say, of all encumbrances."

It was a poor attempt at *facetiæ*—a very weak effort to carry things off with a high hand, like a Hinchford. But he played his part well; he did not break down; he confessed his inability to keep a wife, or think of a wife, and he spoke out like one who had reached man's estate, and felt strong to bear man's troubles.

Mr. Wesden stared at Sidney long after he had concluded, and a pause had followed the outburst; Harriet Wesden, with a heightened colour, looked down at her white hands so tightly clasped together in her lap, and thought that it was a strange explanation—a strange hour for an explanation which he might have chosen his time to give to her alone. Surely she might have been offered an opportunity of giving an answer also, and spared that embarrassment with which his thoughtlessness had afflicted her. Could her father answer for *her*, as well as for himself!

Mr. Wesden delivered his reply, after several moments' grave deliberation.

"Mr. Sidney," said he, "I always did hate anything kept back, and doubted the honesty of anybody keeping it. The truth, however hard it may be to tell, will always bear the light upon it, I'm inclined to think."

Harriet winced.

"And you've spoken fair," he continued, "and given her up like a man. Now let her answer for herself; if she don't mind waiting till you're able to keep her—till you're forty or fifty, as you say," he added, drily, "why, I shan't stand in opposition. The longer the engagement, the longer she'll be my daughter. There, can I put it in a fairer light than that?"

Sidney's harangue, or Sidney's father's port-wine, had rendered Mr. Wesden magnanimous as well as loquacious that evening; or else, in business, his better nature was developing anew.

Now to such an answer as this, one can imagine Sidney Hinchford starting to his feet and wringing Mr. Wesden's hand, or turning suddenly to Harriet and looking earnestly, almost beseechingly, in her direction. On the contrary, he remained silent and moody; Mr. Wesden's answer was unprepared for, and his compliment to his straightforwardness brought a colour to Sidney's cheek—for, after all, he *was* keeping something back!

There was a painful silence, broken at last by a low and faltering

voice, the musical murmur of which drew Sidney's eyes towards her at last.

"Has Mr. Sidney the patience to wait for me, or care for a long engagement, of which he may eventually tire?"

"Patience—care for an engagement!" he almost shouted.

"Then, when he asks me again," said Harriet, "I will give him my answer. But," with an arch smile towards him, "I will wait till I *am* asked."

"Bless you, my dear girl!" exclaimed old Hinchford, "I feel like a father to you already; as for waiting, every true boy and girl will wait for each other—why shouldn't they, if they love one another, eh, Sid?"

His hand came heavily on Sid's shoulder, and knocked off his son's glasses.

"Ah! why shouldn't they, if they are sure of love lasting all the long time between engagement and marriage? Harriet! dear Harriet!" he exclaimed, "I will ask you presently."

"When the old fogies are out of the way, and the courtship can be carried on in the recondite style," cried his elated father; "a sly dog this, who will not be embarrassed by witnesses—eh, Wesden?"

Wesden gave a short laugh—a double-knock species of laugh, in which he indulged when more than usually hilarious.

"Ah! that is it!" he said; "and as for waiting, why Mrs. Wesden and I are an old couple, and mayn't keep you waiting so long as you fancy, Sidney. It isn't much money, but——"

"That will do, Sir," said Sidney, hastily, "I must support my wife, not let my wife support me. Harriet," turning to the daughter with an impetuosity almost akin to fierceness, "is it not time to return to Camberwell?"

"Oh! ho!—do you hear that, Wesden?" cried the father.

Mr. Hinchford had forgotten the downfall of his son's air built castle, in the happiness which he believed would make amends for it to Sidney. And if Sidney were content—why, he was.

Harriet was glad of an excuse to escape. Two old gentlemen talking of love affairs—her love affairs—before the suitor, was scarcely fair, and her position was not enviable. And besides that, Sidney Hinchford's manner had not been comprehensible, and required explanation; she could almost believe that he did not desire an engagement; there was so little of the impassioned lover in his new demeanour. There was a mystery, and she would be glad to have it dissipated.

Harriet went away, escorted by her lover, and the two fathers drew their chairs closer to the fire and drank the health of the happy couple as they went out at the door.

"This is a proud day for you and me, to have such children, and to see them growing up fonder and fonder of each other every day—eh, Wesden?"

"Yes. I have been uneasy about Harriet, and leaving her alone in the world. She will be always happy with him, and have a good protector."

"That she will. How the little girl would have clapped her hands at this!"

"What little girl?" asked Wesden.

"Why, Mattie, to be sure,—Mattie, who used to play the mother almost to those two, her seniors, and be always as interested as a mother in making a match between them."

"Ah!—Mattie!—yes!"

Mr. Wesden looked about for his pipe and his pipe-lights on the mantelpiece.

Mr. Hinchford drew his favourite meerschaum from his coat-pocket. The two old men faced each other, and began to smoke vigorously.

"I wonder where that girl has got to?" suggested Hinchford.

"It's impossible to say. In good hands, I hope."

"I'd lay a heavy wager that she knows whose birthday it is to-day," commented Mr. Hinchford; "she was a girl who never forgot anything."

"Ah—perhaps so!"

"And I think she might have cleared up the fog, if you had waited a bit, Wesden."

"Why didn't she, if she could?"

"I don't know. I promised to believe in her, and somehow I do."

"Can anything in the world account for a girl her age being out all night?" said Wesden.

"Ah! that looks bad—I can't get over that!" said Mr. Hinchford, giving his head one sorrowful shake.

Poor Mattie!—poor stray! whose actions, the best and most unselfish, were not to be accounted for or done justice to in this world.

CHAPTER II.

SIDNEY'S CONFESSION.

Sidney Hinchford escorted Harriet Wesden home to Camberwell. A most unromantic walk down the Newington Causeway—sacred to milliners and counter-skippers—the Walworth Road, Camberwell Road, and streets branching thence to melancholy suburbs—and yet a walk that was the happiest in the lives of these two, though looked back upon in after years through tear-dimmed eyes, and sighed for by hearts that had been sorely wrung. Such a walk as most of us may have taken once in life—seldom more than once—a walk away from sober realism into fairy-land, where everything apart from love was a something to be utterly despised, and where love first rose to fill our souls with promise. What if the story ended abruptly, and the waking came, and one or two of us fell heavily to earth—we did not die of the wounds, and we see now that the fall was the best thing that could have happened for us. We look back at the past, and regret not the sunshine that dazzled us there.

And yet there was a stern story to relate, and Sidney had escorted Harriet Wesden home, believing in the darkness rather than the light upon his way. He went forth regarding life literally, and he found himself, after a while, in the land of romance, wherein sober existence had no dwelling-place.

Let him tell the story in his own way.

Harriet and Sidney had not proceeded a long distance together before he began.

"I think that I must have puzzled you very much, Harriet, by this evening's behaviour—by the way in which I received your kindness—more than kindness. There was a reason, and I am going to explain it."

"Is it worth explanation?" asked Harriet.

"I think so—you shall judge. It is an explanation that I cannot give my father, for it would break his heart, I think, with the long suspense which would follow it."

"So serious an explanation as that, Sidney?"

"Yes. Is it not odd that, with my character for straightforwardness, I should have been all my life keeping back the truth?"

"From him—for his sake, only, Sidney?"

"Perhaps for my own—to save myself from a host of inquisitive questions, and an attention that would irritate rather than soothe—I am a very selfish man."

"I don't believe that yet awhile."

"When I came home to-night, I had no other hope than that you and your father would consider that I had not made good my claim to become a favoured suitor, and that there was nothing left me but to make my statement and withdraw my rash pretensions. You will pardon me, Harriet, but it had never struck me that you were strong enough, or—pardon me again—that you had ever loved me well enough to attempt a *sacrifice*."

"I was a girl—very vain and frivolous—you were right."

"I come back to find you altered very much, Harriet. I find the old reserve that piqued my pride no longer there, and, instead, a something newer and more frank, a something that says, 'Trust me.' Is that a true reading?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"I am vain enough to believe in the heart growing fonder during my absence—though I have always fancied the experiment full of danger for the absent one. Say that the heart has done so—or that I did not understand you. Still the effect was the same, or I should not have the courage to tell you the great secret of my life. If I believed that you did not love me, or that you had ever loved any one else, I would not venture to put you to *this* test."

Harriet hung down her head, and her heart beat rapidly; the old story was before her, and his very words seemed now to forbid its revelation. His firm, self-reliant nature had never swerved from her, and he judged others by himself. His was a love that had begun from boyhood, and grown with his growth; should she raise the first suspicion against her by telling him all, when it was in her power—and only in *her* power—to make him happy, to make amends for all by her new love for him? Let him test her how he liked now, she was a woman who looked at life seriously, and the follies of her youth were over!

They walked on silently for a while; they went on together, playing their love-dream out, and oblivious of the matter-of-fact world hustling them in their progress.

"This is the love test—and it must be a strange pure love to exist after I have told all," he said.

"Do you doubt me, Sidney, already?"

"I cannot tell. I cannot," he added, more passionately, "believe in any affection strong and deep enough to last; but I can forgive, and consider natural, any love that turns to pity at the truth. Do you comprehend me?"

"Scarcely."

"Well, then—*I am going blind!*"

An awful and unexpected revelation, which took her breath away, and seemed for an instant to stop her heart beating.

"Oh! Sidney—my poor Sidney—it cannot be!"

"Sooner or later, Harriet, it must be; mine is a hopeless case," he answered; "with care, and less night work, and quiet—that last means absence from all mental excitement—I may go on for a few years more; the last physician whom I have consulted even thinks he can give me ten years' grace. Now in ten years, ten of the best years of a young man's life, I ought to save, and I hope to save sufficient to live upon. I may be over-sanguine, but if I get a good foothold I will try. And now where lives the girl who will accept a ten years' engagement, with the chance of a beggar or a blind man at the end of it?"

Harriet pressed his arm.

"Here," she answered.

"You will! There is the faith to wait, the courage to endure, and the love to sustain me. You are not afraid?"

"No—I have no fear," replied Harriet, warmly. "God knows that I *have* changed very much, and only lately learned to understand myself. I do not fear, Sidney, for I—I have learned to love you, and, by comparison, to see how noble and high-principled you are. But oh! if I were but more worthy of you, and your deep love for me!"

"Worthy!" he echoed; "why, what have I done to deserve a life's devotion to me, save to love you, which was the most natural thing in the world? What have I ever done to deserve the happiness of winning your love—a long-legged, near-sighted gawky like me!—and such a love as shrinks not from the dark prospect ahead, but will disperse it by its brightness, and keep me from despairing. Why, in ten years time we shall not be an old couple—I shall only be one-and-thirty, and you but nine-and-twenty. When the light goes out," he added, solemnly, "you will place your hand in mine to make amends for it, and begin my new happiness by the wife's companionship; shall I be so very much to be pitied then, I wonder?"

"I hope not, Sid."

She had not called him by that name since he was a boy, and his heart thrilled at it, and took fresh hope from it.

"All this on my part, I know is very selfish," he said. "I have told you already that I am a selfish man, to wish that your youth and beauty and love should be sacrificed to my affliction. I did not think of gaining them; I was content to pass away from you, and see you allied to one more deserving, more fitting, than myself; even now, I will go away resigned, thinking you are right to give me up, if but one doubt linger at your heart."

"Not one," was the firm answer.

"I can bear all now—afterwards, a doubt would strike me down—remember that."

"Trust in me, Sid—ever."

"I will."

The hand that had rested on his arm was held in his now, and they walked on together, with their hearts as full of happiness as though blindness were a trifling calamity, scarcely worth considering under the circumstances.

Sidney had pictured so dark a prospect ahead, that this sudden change made all bright, and Harriet Wesden was happy in being able to prove that her love was unselfish and strong. She did not believe that she had ever loved any one else then—she knew that hers was a different and more intense affection, something that felt like love, and that nothing in the world could destroy. Mr. Darcy was but a phantom, far back in the mists—his own dark efforts had utterly extinguished every ray of romance, in the false light of which he had luridly shone. Strengthened by her new love, she could have broken her promise to Mattie, and told all then, trusting in him to see the truth, and believe in her henceforth; but he had spoken of the danger of excitement to him, and once again—once for all—went the story back, never to hover on the brink of discovery again!

It was a strange courtship—that of Sidney Hinchford and Harriet's—but they were happy. The calamity was in the distance, and their hearts were young and strong. Both had faith then—and of the chances and changes of life it was not natural to dwell upon, after the one avowal had been uttered.

"Then it *is* an engagement," he had asked hoarsely, and she had answered "Yes," with his own frankness and boldness; and thus the path ahead seemed bright enough.

Outside the suburban retreat of the Wesdens Sidney Hinchford had a little struggle with duty and inclination—conquering inclination with that strong will of his.

"I'll go back to the old gentleman," he said at last; "he is scarcely used to my reappearance yet, and a little makes him nervous. Good-bye, love."

A lover's parting at the iron gate, to the intense edification of the potman coming up the street with the nine o'clock beer; and then Sidney tore himself homewards, thinking what a happy fellow he was, and how the business disappointments of life had been softened by the events that had followed them. The future could not be dark with Harriet; before this he had become resigned to his calamity, bent his strong mind to regard it as inevitable; now there was to come happiness with it, and he would be more than content, he thought.

He was soon back in Suffolk Street. Mr. Wesden was in the

shop talking to a short, thin man with a sallow complexion, a hooked nose, bright black eyes, and straight hair; a man dressed in black, with a rusty satin stock of the same colour, secured by an old-fashioned brooch of gold wire, in the shape of a heart.

"And her name was Mattie, you say?"

"That was the name she called herself, and went always by in this house."

"And you don't know her whereabouts?"

"I haven't an idea."

"But you think she has gone wrong, don't you?" the man asked with no small eagerness.

"Well, I hope not; but I think so."

"Who? Mattie!" cried Sidney, suddenly thrusting himself into the conversation; "our Mattie—that be—*hanged?*"

He checked himself in time to save scandalising the ears of the gentleman in black, who twirled round with a teetotum velocity and faced him.

"What do you know of her, young man?" he asked abruptly.

"What do you want to know for?" was the rejoinder.

"I wish to find her—I am very anxious to find her."

"I hope you may, if it's for her good."

"Her moral and spiritual good, Sir—without a doubt."

"You can't improve her. There isn't a better or more unselfish girl in the world!"

"*What!*" screamed the man in black.

"Not a better girl, I verily believe. I haven't heard the reasons for her departure yet," he said, looking at Mr. Wesden; "but they're good ones, or I was never more mistaken in my life."

"You are mistaken," said Mr. Wesden; "I've tried to think the best of Mattie, but I can't. There are no honest reasons for her conduct, or she would have told me."

Sidney Hinchford paused.

"It must be very unreasonable conduct then," said Sidney, "and she must have changed very much during my absence from this house. But, upon my soul!" he exclaimed vehemently, "I shan't believe any harm in her, for one!"

The stranger regarded Sidney Hinchford attentively, then said—

"You need not have brought your soul into question, Sir. Pledge that in God's service—nothing else."

"Oh!" said Sidney, taken aback at the reproof.

"You speak warmly; and somehow I've a hope of her not being very bad—of reclaiming her by my own earnest efforts. Young man, I will thank you."

He stretched forth an ungloved hand, which Sidney took—a hard hand, that gripped Sid forcibly and made him wince a little.

"You all seem in doubt, more or less," he said; "and that gives me hope. Mr. Wesden and you don't agree in opinion,

and that's something. Who's that white-haired man I see in the parlour?"

"That's my father, Sir," said Sidney, smiling at the sudden curiosity evinced.

"Does he know anything about her?"

"Not so much as myself," said Mr. Wesden.

"Have you asked the servant—if you keep one?"

"I have asked her everything, and she knows nothing," replied the stationer.

"Then I'll go. I think I shall find her yet, mind you," he said, in an excited manner. "I'm not a man to give up in a hurry, when I've taken an idea in my head. I've been sixteen years looking for that girl!"

"Are you a relation?" asked Sidney.

"Her father."

"Indeed!"

The stranger began hammering the counter with his hard hand, till the money in the till underneath rattled again. He began to take small leaps in the air, also, during the progress of his harangue.

"Her father—a poor man reclaimed from error, and knowing what it is to walk uprightly. A man who has, he trusts, done some good in his day—a man who now sets himself the task of finding that daughter he neglected once. And I'll find her and reclaim her—God will show me the way, I think. And you shall see her again, a shining light in the midst of ye—a brand from the burning, a credit to *me!* There's hope for her yet. Good night."

And very abruptly the gentleman in black leaped out of the shop and disappeared.

"That's an odd fish," remarked Sidney.

CHAPTER III.

A FLYING VISIT TO NUMBER THIRTY-FOUR.

Before Mr. Wesden had finally disposed of his business in Great Suffolk Street, he met with his greatest trouble in the loss of the companion, helpmate, wife, who had struggled with him for many years from indigence to moderate competence. Mrs. Wesden's health had been failing for some time, but her loss was still as unprepared for, and the husband bent lower and walked more feebly when his better half—his better self—was taken from him in his latter days.

"You have still me, remember," said Harriet, when the undemonstrative nature gave way, and he sobbed like a child at his isolation; and he had answered, "Ah! *you* musn't desert me yet awhile—you must comfort me," and refused to be comforted for many a long day. His character even altered once more—as characters alter in all cases, except in novels; and though the abruptness remained, and the silent fits were of longer duration, he became less harsh in his judgments, and more easily influenced for good. This was evident one day, when after an intense study of the fire before which he sat, he burst forth with—

"I wonder if I acted well by Mattie—poor Mattie, who would be so sorry to hear all the sad news that has happened since she left us."

Harriet, who had always taken Mattie's part to the verge of her own confession, answered warmly,

"No, *we* all acted very badly—very cruelly. When she comes again, as she will, I feel assured—I hope she will forgive us, father."

"Forgive us?"

Mr. Wesden had not arrived at that pitch of kind consideration yet, but Mattie's departure and long silence were troubles to him when he was left to think of the past, and of the business from which he had at last retired in earnest.

The shop had changed proprietors, and the Hinchfords, father and son, had removed their furniture from Mr. Wesden's first floor to a little house Camberwell way, also. A very small domicile had this careful couple decided upon for their suburban retreat—one of a row of houses that we may designate Chesterfield Terrace, and the rents of which were two-and-twenty pounds per annum.

Mr. Hinchford, we have already premised, had somewhat lofty notions, which adversity had kept in check, rather than subdued. The removal to Chesterfield Terrace was a blow to him. The rooms in Great Suffolk Street had been only borne with, scarcely resigned to; but though he had lived there many years, he had never considered himself as "settled down"—merely resting by the way, before he marched off to independence and the old Hinchford state. It had been a mythical dream, perhaps, until Sidney's star rose in the ascendant, and then he had quickly built his castles in the air, and bided his time more sanguinely. When that vision faded in its turn, the old gentleman was sorely tried; only his son's strategy in feigning to require consolation had turned him away from his own regrets to thoughts of how to make them less light for—the BOY.

But 34, Chesterfield Terrace, Chesterfield Road, Camberwell New Road, was a blow to him. The air was fresher than in Great Suffolk Street, the large market gardens at the back of his house were pleasant in all seasons, except the cabbage season; there were three bed-rooms, two parlours, a wash-house at the back, and a long strip of garden, constituting a house and premises that were solely and wholly theirs, and entitled them to the glorious privilege of electing a member for incorruptible Lambeth; but the change was not all that Mr. Hinchford had looked forward to for so many years, and he grew despondent, and fancied that it could never be better now.

The Hinchfords had taken into their service Ann Packet, of workhouse origin, and undiscoverable parentage; she had pleaded to be constituted their servant, at any wages, or no wages at all, rather than at her time of life to be sent forth in search of fresh faces and new homes.

At this period, Mr. Wesden had required a servant also, and Ann Packet had begged Sidney Hinchford to engage her at once, before she should be asked to continue in the old service.

"What! tired of them?" Sidney had said, with some surprise.

"They gave me warning," replied Ann, somewhat sullenly, "and I accepts the same. They turned poor Mattie away without warning at all, and I never forgives 'em that, Sir."

"Ah! you are on Mattie's side too, Ann?"

"There never was a girl who thought so little of herself, and so much of others!" cried Ann, "or who desarved less to be sent out into the streets. I gave up the Wesdens after that, Sir."

"But Miss Harriet is Mattie's champion also, and will defend her to the death, Ann."

"And will she be a Wesden all her life, Sir?" asked Ann Packet, with an archness for which she was only that once remarkable.

Ann Packet became domestic servant at 34, Chesterfield Terrace, then, and congratulated herself on the kitchen being level with the

parlours, which was good for her ankles, and spared her breath considerably.

Meanwhile the shadows were stealing on towards the Hinchford dwelling-place; Sidney's month in service with his old employers had been extended to two months, after which the firm, utterly shattered by adversity, was to dissolve itself into its component atoms, and be never heard of more in the busy streets east of Temple Bar.

Sidney, it need scarcely be said, had not sat idle during the time; he had looked keenly round him for a change of clerkship. His employers had interested themselves in a way not remarkable in employers, towards securing him a foothold in other and more stable establishments, but business was slack in the City, and there were no fresh hands wanted just at present.

Sidney was not a young man to despair; he let no chance slip, and disappointment did not relax his efforts. He did not believe that the time would come and leave him wholly without "a berth." He had faith in his abilities, and he thought that they would work a way for him somewhere. And even a week or two "out of work" would not hurt him; he had saved money, and could pay his fair share towards the household expenses as well as his father, who kept his place longer than Sidney had ever believed he would.

His father was more solicitous than himself; every evening he asked very anxiously if Sidney had heard of anything in the City, and was not greatly exhilarated by Sid's careless, "Not yet." Things were getting serious when there was only a week more to spend at the old desk, where bright hopes had been born and collapsed; Sidney was even becoming grave, although his company manners were put on before the father, to keep the old gentleman's mind at ease.

But Mr. Hinchford's mind was not likely to be at ease at that period; he was playing a part himself, and disguising his own troubles from his son, thereby causing a double game at disinterestedness between Sid and him.

Three weeks before the son's time had expired at his office, Mr. Hinchford had received a week's notice to quit. His memory had again betrayed him, confused the accounts, and put the clerks out, and it was considered necessary to inform the old gentleman that his services were not likely to be required any longer. The notice came like a thunderbolt to Mr. Hinchford, whose belief in his own powers was still strong, and who had not had the remotest idea that long ago he had been tolerated by his employers, and set down for a troublesome, pompous, and disputatious old boy by the whipper-snappers round him. His salary had never been more than thirty-five shillings a week, and he had put up with it rather than be grateful for it, looking forward to the future rise of the Hinchfords above the paltry shillings and pence of every-day routine. He had

not anticipated being turned off—pronounced worn-out in that service which a Hinchford had patronised.

The poor old fellow's pride was touched, and he took his adieux and his last week's salary with a lordly air, looking to the life the gentleman that he had been once. He expressed no regret at the summary dismissal, but marched out of the office with his white head thrown a little more back than usual, and it was only as he neared Chesterfield Terrace that his courage gave way, and he began to think of the future prospects of Sid and himself.

Sid was in trouble, and a little more bad news might be too much for him. He would try and keep his secret, until Sid had found a good berth for himself in the City. Affairs were looking desperate, and the revelation must come, but he could bear it himself, he thought—this weak old man with no faith in the strong son, whom an avalanche might affect, little else. Mr. Hinchford took Ann Packet into his confidence, and impressed her with the necessity of keeping Sid in the dark concerning the father's absence from business.

"Don't tell him, Ann, that I keep away from office after he's left—it's easy for me to make an excuse for an early return, if he come back before his time. I wouldn't have that boy worried for the world just now."

Ann Packet, who took time to digest matters foreign to her ordinary business, was some days in comprehending the facts of the case, and then held counsel with herself as to whether it were expedient to keep Sidney in ignorance, considering how the old gentleman "went on" during his son's absence.

"He'll fret himself to death, and I shall be hanged for not stopping it, p'raps," she thought.

Once or twice she took the liberty of intruding into the parlour, and recommending Mr. Hinchford, senior, to try a walk, or a book, or a visit to Mr. Wesden; and, startled out of his maunderings, he would make an effort to follow one of the three counsels, seldom the last, because Mr. Wesden was Harriet's father, and saw Sid very frequently.

He took many walks in search of a situation for himself, but the one refrain was, "Too old," and he began to see that he had overstepped the boundary, and was scarcely fit for a new place. He almost conceived an idea—just a foggy one, which, however, he never confessed to his dying day—that he *was* a little forgetful at times; for Chesterfield Terrace lay in a net-work of newly-built streets at the back of the Camberwell New Road, and he was always taking the wrong turning, and losing himself. Still it was deep thought about Sid which led him in the wrong direction—presently his mind would be more composed; Sid would be in a good place, and he need not have one secret from him.

The last day came round: Sidney's services were over for good;

he had had a painful parting with his old masters, who had been more than commonly attached to him, and he came home looking a little grave, despite the best face on the matter which he had put on at the front door.

"Anything new in the City, Sid?" asked the father.

"No, nothing new," he replied. "What makes you home so early to-day?"

Sid had turned in before the daylight was over, and found his father walking up and down the room with his hands behind him.

"Early?" repeated the old man. "Oh! they're not particularly busy just now in the Bridge Road. Very slack, I may say."

"Ah! I suppose so," said Sid, absently.

"And there's nothing new at all then, Sid?"

"Nothing."

"You'll keep a stout heart, my boy," said the father, with a cheering voice, and yet with a lip that quivered in spite of him. "I suppose, now, you don't feel very dull?"

"Dull, with my wits about me, and a hundred chances, perhaps, waiting for me in the City to-morrow!"

"Yes, you'll have all day to-morrow—I had forgotten that," said Mr. Hinchford; "to be sure, all day now!"

Sidney saw that his father was perplexed, even disturbed in mind, but he set down Mr. Hinchford's embarrassment to the same source as his own thoughts: he did not know that he had only inherited his unselfishness from his sire. Or rather, he did not remember, how an unselfish heart, allied to an unthinking head, had been the cause of the downfall in old times.

On the morrow, Sidney Hinchford had the day before him, but the result was bad. He had visited many of the houses heretofore in connection with the old firm, but luck was against him, and many objected to a clerk from a house that had collapsed. It had been a fair bankruptcy; one of those honourable "break ups" which occur once or twice in a century, and are more completely break ups from sheer honesty of purpose than cases which make a "to-do" in the Court, and march off with flying colours; but Sidney represented one of a staff that had come to grief somehow, and "there was nothing in his way just at present."

Three or four days passed like this, and matters were becoming serious to the Hinchfords—father and son seemed settling down to misfortune, although the son betrayed no anxiety, and the father's care were for the hours when the son's back was turned. In fact, Sidney Hinchford was not quickly dispirited; a little did not seriously affect him, and he went on doggedly and persistently, making the round of all the great firms that had had, once upon a time, dealings with his own; abashed seldom, dispirited never, firmly and stolidly proceeding on his way, and calmly waiting for the chance that would come in due time.

Meanwhile, the father went down to zero immediately the door closed behind Sidney. He felt that he was not acting fairly by keeping the secret of his discharge from Sid; but he was waiting for good news, that might counterbalance the bad which he had to communicate. He knew that in a day or two, at the utmost, all must come out, but he put off the evil day to the last—a characteristic weakness—weakness or good policy, which was it? —that he had adopted ever since there had been evil days to fret about.

In the grey afternoon of an April day, he sat alone in his front parlour, more utterly dispirited than he had been since his wife's death, years ago. No good fortune had come either to father or son, and he was inclined to regard things in the future lugubriously; workhouses and parish funerals not being the least of his fancy sketches. He had taken his head between his hands, and was brooding very deeply before the scanty little fire-place, which he intended to heap up with coal a few minutes before Sidney's expected return, when Ann Packet came into the room, very confused, and speaking in a hoarse voice.

"If you please, Sir, here's a visitor!"

"I can't see any visitors, Ann," he answered sharply, "unless—unless it's any one from——"

"It's only Mattie, Sir; she's come to see you for a moment."

"Mattie! bless my soul! has she turned up again?"

"She turned up at the front door only a minute ago. Lord bless her! You might have knocked me down with a straw, Sir!"

"I'll see her—show her in."

Mattie came in the instant afterwards; the hall of the Hinchfords was not so spacious but that anything spoken in the front room would reach the ears of one waiting in the passage. She heard the answer, and entered at once.

"Well, Mattie, how are you?"

"Pretty well, I thank you, Sir," was returned in the old brisk accents.

Mattie was not looking pretty well; on the contrary, very pale and thin, as though anxiety, or hard work, or both, had been her portion since she had left Great Suffolk Street. She was dressed in black, very neatly dressed, and possibly the dark trappings had some effect in increasing the pallor of her countenance.

"We thought that we had lost you for good, Mattie."

"Was it likely, Sir, that I was going to lose sight of all those who had been kind to me?"

"You're not looking very well," he said.

"Ah! we musn't judge by people's looks," said Mattie, cheerfully. "I'm well enough, thank God! And you, Sir?"

"Well, Mattie, thank God, too!"

"And Sidney, Si

"As brave as ever. I wish he had been at home—he has been anxious to see you, Mattie."

"He is very kind," she said in a low voice, adding, "and what does *he* think?"

Mr. Hinchford was not quick in catching a subject upon which Mattie had brooded now for some months.

"Think of what?"

"Of me! Mr. Wesden has—hasn't turned him against me, Sir?"

"Oh! no. He sticks up for you like a champion!"

"I thought he would. He never spoke ill of anyone in his life, and he always took the part of those who were unfortunate. I was sure he would not side against me!"

"Sit down, Mattie, sit down!"

"Thank you, no, Sir! I shall never sit down in the house of anyone who has heard ill news of me, until I can clear myself, or time clears me. I shall never go near Mr. Wesden's, although I feel for all the sorrow there."

"You know what has happened, then?"

"I have put on black, as for a lost mother. I was at the funeral, but they did not see me. Oh! Sir, I know all about you—what should I do alone in the world, if I didn't think of those who *saved* me when I was young?"

"And what are you doing?"

"Getting my living by needlework, by artificial flower making, or by anything that is honest which falls in my way. I keep at work, and hunt about for work, and there are some good people, I find, who take pity upon those situated like myself. I'm not afraid, Sir, of doing well!"

"Glad to hear it, Mattie."

Mattie motioned Ann Packet to retire. Ann, who had been standing in the doorway all this time, open-mouthed and open-eared, withdrew at the hint. Mattie advanced and laid her hand upon Mr. Hinchford's arm.

"He goes there very often—they are engaged!" Mr. Hinchford, who had always one thought uppermost, understood this at once—there was no necessity for any nominative cases—"Boy Sid" always understood.

"Yes."

"But he don't go to business now—the business is over."

"Who told you?"

"I read it in the paper a lodger lends me sometimes. Mr. Sidney's out of work!"

"At present—for a day or two."

"He has heard of something that will better him?"

"He will in a day or two."

"And you—you're out of work too, Sir?"

"That confounded Ann has told you——"

"Not a word, Sir—but I have had a habit of looking for you, when I passed the house where I lodged, twice a-day—and I couldn't settle down, or feel comfortable, until you *had* passed. And when you did not come, I knew what had happened."

"Still full of curiosity, Mattie," said Mr. Hinchford, feeling the tears in his eyes at this evidence of Mattie's interest in him.

"Curious about all of you," she said, with a comprehensive gesture; "I don't feel so far away when I know what has happened, or is happening. And wanting to know the worst or the best of everything, I come like an inquisitive little body, as I have always been, to take you by surprise like this!"

"But—but, my good girl, I can't tell you that we're very lucky just now. But Sid must not hear that I am getting very uncomfortable, and becoming less able to bear up than I ought to do, just to keep him strong, do you see? And if all goes on like this much longer, both out of work, what will become of us? Oh! dear, dear, dear!—what a miserable old man I've been to him and myself, and everybody! Oh! to be comfortably out of the world, and a burden to no one!"

"Sir," said Mattie, earnestly, "a blessing to some. Don't you remember when you were stronger, being a blessing to me—you, my first friend? And don't you know that you're a blessing to that good son of yours, and that he thinks so, and loves you as he ought to do? You mustn't make him unhappy by giving way at this time."

"I don't give way before him, that's not likely. Strong as a rock, child!"

The rock shook and trembled from summit to base, but Mattie did not smile at the contrast which his words suggested.

"What are you doing for him now—sitting here, Mr. Hinchford, and trying to *look* your best?"

"Doing!—what can I do?"

"That's what I have been thinking about, Sir. When I'm at the flower-making—which I am learning in over-time, because it don't pay just yet—I get, oh! such lots of time to think."

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

Mr. Hinchford always forgot disparity of age, and was content to be taught by Mattie, and receive advice from her. He wondered at it afterwards, but never when the spell of her presence was on him, when her young vigorous mind overpowered his weak efforts to rebel.

"Well, I have thought that Mr. Wesden, being a little—just a little—suspicious, would soon object to the engagement, if Mr. Sidney kept out of work too long. I can't say, for I don't perhaps understand Mr. Wesden, but it has been my idea; and oh! Sir, they are so suited to each other, Harriet and he!"

"Well," he said again, "I don't think that Mr. Wesden's likely to object—but go on."

"And when I heard that the firm had failed, I began to wonder what he would do, for places are hard to get, even when one's clever now-a-days, and *has* a character to back him. And I wanted to ask you if you had thought of your brother, Sir?"

"Why—what do you know of my brother?"

"He came one night to Great Suffolk Street to see you—don't you remember? I knew him by his likeness to yourself, before I saw his name upon his card."

"My brother!"

Mr. Hinchford gave a tug to his stock; it had not struck him before and its very absurdity rather amused him. His brother, who turned a deaf ear to his own plaints, when misfortune was fresh upon him—when that brother's help might have saved him, as he thought, from all the troubles and adversities which had oppressed him since their bitter quarrel.

"And he's a rich man—I have been asking about him—he's a banker, Sir, and keeps a great many hands."

"Yes, yes, I know," he said impatiently; "but it's no good. I wouldn't ask a favour of him for the world. If it hadn't been for him, my old age would not be like this!"

"He's an old man—perhaps he's altered very much," suggested Mattie; "he might know something that would suit Mr. Sidney."

"Don't speak of him again," Mr. Hinchford said with some severity.

"Very well, Sir," was the sad response; "then I'll go now."

"Will you not wait till Sid comes back?—I'm sure he——"

"No, no, Sir—I would rather not see him—I am pressed for time, and have a great deal to do when I get back. There's one thing more I came for, Sir."

"What's that?"

"I want you to try and remember a letter which you gave me, when I went away from Great Suffolk Street."

"A letter—a letter—let me see!"

The old gentleman evidently did not remember anything about a letter; no letter had seen the light, or all had been explained between Harriet and Sidney, and the course of true love was running smoothly to the end. So much the better; it was as well to say no more about it, Mattie thought. If the letter were lost, the old gentleman might only create suspicion by alluding to it upon Sidney's return; Mattie did not know how far to trust him.

She went away a few minutes afterwards, stopping for a while to exchange greetings with Ann Packet, to whom she gave her address—a back street in Southwark Bridge road—after much adjuration.

"You won't mind me, my dear," said Ann, "now you're settled

down to something—but, oh! dear, how thin you've got You've been fretting all the flesh off your precious bones."

"I haven't fretted much, Ann," was Mattie's answer; "you know I never liked to do anything but make the best of it. And I've not tried in vain—all will come right again—I'm sure of it!"

"And the worst is over—ain't it?"

"To be sure, the very worst. And now don't tell my address to anyone—not to Mr. Sidney or Miss Harriet especially."

"But Miss Harriet——"

"Will only offend her father by coming to see *me*—you, Ann, won't offend anyone very much."

"On'y a poor stray like yourself, Mattie—am I?"

"And our hearts don't stray very far from those we have loved, Ann—and never will."

"Ah! she talks like a book almost—the sight of learning that that child got hold on, and the deal of good she does a body," muttered Ann, looking after Mattie through the misty twilight stealing up the street.

"For every one her liked, and every one her loved," wrote Spenser, ages ago, of his heroine. Ann Packet might have quoted the same words, barring all thoughts of Mr. Wesden, whom the force of events had turned aside from Mattie.

Mr. Hinchford liked Mattie; her presence had brightened him up, given a shake to ideas that had been rusting of late.

"She's a quick girl," he muttered, "but she has the most foolish and out-the-way thoughts. How she disturbs one—I meant to have asked her seriously, and yet kindly, why she stopped out all night, and offended Mr. Wesden. Odd I should forget that—I don't generally let things slip my memory in that ridiculous fashion. And about that man who called himself her father—why, I forgot that, too!—God bless me! A curious girl—my brother, indeed!—my hard-hearted and unsympathetic brother!"

CHAPTER IV.

HIS TURN!

Mr. Hinchford did not forget the foolish and out-of-the-way thought of Mattie's. It has been already said that his memory was retentive enough in all things that affected his son's welfare, and the new suggestion kept his mind busy as the days stole on, and Sidney brought back his cheerful face but no good news with him.

The old man's pride had kept him aloof from the brother for many years; he had been hurt by that brother's coldness, and he had resolved to show that he was able to work his own way in life, without that assistance which he had once solicited. He had kept his word; for his own sake it had been easy, but, for his son's, there was a temptation he could scarcely withstand. There might be a chance, there might not be; in his heart, he thought the odds were against Sid. He did not set much value upon the brother's visit to Great Suffolk Street; it might have been curiosity, or a spasm of affection which had rendered him eccentric for a day; he remembered his brother simply as a hard, inflexible being who, having formed an opinion, closed upon it with a snap, and was ever after that immovable. Still, for Sidney's sake he thought at last that he would try. It should not be said of him that he neglected one chance to benefit his son, or that his pride stood in the way of Sid's advancement—that queer girl, whom he could scarcely make out, should not say that he had not done his best for Sidney.

He dressed himself in his best suit one day, seized his stick, and marched down to Camberwell Green, whence he took the omnibus to the City. Sidney had again departed in quest of "something"—on a visit to the news-rooms to search the papers there—and Mr. Hinchford was following in his wake shortly afterwards.

He had a nervous fear that he should meet Sidney in the City, at first, but the crowd which surrounded him there assured him that that event was not likely to ensue. He had not been in the City for many years and the place alarmed him; he almost guessed how weak and nervous he had become when he struggled with the mob of money-hunters in King William Street, and found it hard to fight against.

"All these hunting for places in one shape or another," he thought,

"looking but for the best chance, and greedy of anyone who gets in the way, and seems likely to deprive them of it, or add to their expenses. Why, where's all the places that hold these men and keep my Sid doing nothing?"

He turned into the narrow lanes branching out of the great thoroughfare leading to the Bank, and proceeded without any difficulty to the banking-house of his brother Geoffry. His memory was not in fault here; every short cut through the shady by-ways of the City he took by instinct—he had banked with his brother in days gone by, and it was like retracing his youthful steps to find himself once more in these old streets.

Before the swing-glass doors of a quiet, old-fashioned banking-house he paused, changed the stick from his right hand to his left, gave a little tug to his stock, changed hands again with his stick, finally crossed over the way, and set his back against the dingy wall opposite. The pride which had held him aloof so long from his brother rose up again, that ruling passion which a struggling life had circumscribed. He became very red in the face, and looked almost fiercely at the banking-house in front of him. He felt that his brother would say "No" again, and the humiliation in store he should have courted by his own folly. But Sidney?—possibly Sidney might be of service there, and room found for him, if he asked; and if not; still, for Sidney's sake, he must attempt it—courage and forward!

Mr. Hinchford nerved himself to the task, crossed the road, and went up the steps into the bank. They were busy before and behind the counters there; money was being shovelled in and out of drawers; cheques were flying across the counter; there was the stir and bustle of a first-class banking-house before him; everybody was talking, whispering, studying, and thinking of money; what room for any sentiment in that place from nine till four?

He took his place by the counter, waiting to address one of the clerks at the first convenient opportunity that might present itself; he was in no hurry; he wished to collect his thoughts, and arrange his plan of action; and instead of arranging any plan, he looked at the clerks, and thought Sidney Hinchford might as well have a place behind that counter as not—and how well he would look there, and what a good place for him it would be!

He stood there for a considerable time, until his presence began to oppress a bald-headed young man at the third desk, an energetic young man of uncivil appearance—soured in life perhaps, by his hair coming off so early—who, in the hurry of business, had taken little notice of Mr. Hinchford until then.

"What is it?" he asked, abruptly.

Mr. Hinchford objected to abruptness, and felt it hard to be snubbed by his brother's clerk to begin with. He reddened a little, and said that he wished to see Mr. Hinchford directly.

"Mr. Hinchford!" the clerk repeated; "oh! you can't see either of *them!*"

"Just ask, young man, and don't answer for your master!"

"If it's anything about an account, Mr. Maurice will, if you've a proper introduction, at——"

"Mr. Maurice will not do, Sir!" cried Mr. Hinchford; "go and tell my brother directly that I wish to see him, if you please."

There was some pride in claiming brotherhood with the banker, even under the difficulties before him; the effect upon the uncivil bank clerk—why are bank clerks uncivil in the aggregate?—was bewildering; he stared at Mr. Hinchford, detected the likeness at once, and backed from the counter on the instant. Mr. Hinchford saw no more of him—he was beginning to think that his message had not been delivered after all, when a young man behind touched him on the arm.

"Will you please to step this way?"

Mr. Hinchford turned, followed the usher to the end of the counting-house, passed through a room, where two or three gentlemen were busily writing, went through another door into a larger room, where one old gentleman—very like himself—was seated in all the divinity that doth hedge a principal.

"Good morning, James," was the banker's first remark, nodding his head familiarly in his brother's direction.

"Good morning, Geoffry."

And then there was a pause; the two men who had parted in anger nearly twenty-six years ago, and had not met since, looked at each other somewhat curiously. It was a strange meeting, and a strange commencement thereto, a little affected on the part of the banker, the senior by eight years. In the same room together, the likeness between them was singularly apparent—the height, figure, features, even the scanty crop of white hair, were all identical; but in the senior's face there was expressed a vigour and determination, which in Sid's father was wholly wanting. Geoffry Hinchford was still the cool, calculating man of business, who let no chance slip, and who fought for his chances, and held his place with younger men.

There was no sentiment in the meeting of the brothers, and yet each was moved and touched by the changes time had made. They had parted in the prime of life, stalwart, handsome men, and they came face to face in their senility.

"Take a seat," said Geoffry Hinchford, indicating one with the feather of the quill pen he held in his hand.

The brother took a chair with a grave inclination of the head, and then crossed his hands upon his stick, and began to evidence a little of that nervousness that had beset him before he entered the banking-house. Geoffry Hinchford's keen eyes detected this, and he hastened to avoid one of those scenes which he had confessed to his

nephew he hated, when he made his first and last call in Great Suffolk Street.

"You have been walking fast, James; will you look at the *Times* a bit, and compose yourself? *That's* the money article."

He passed the paper over to his brother, and then began making a few entries in a small pocket volume before him—a hybrid book, with a lock and key. Mr. Hinchford turned the paper over in his hands, inspected the money article upside down, and appeared interested in it from that point of view—gave a furtive tug to his stock, which he was sure Sid, who always buttoned it, had taken in a hole too much, and then mustered up courage to begin the subject which had brought him thither.

"Geoffry, it's six-and-twenty years or so since I sat in this very place and asked a favour of you."

"Ah! thereabouts," responded Geoffry from over his private volume.

"Which was refused," added the old gentleman.

"Of course it was."

"Ahem."

Mr. Hinchford cleared his throat with some violence. He did not like this method of receiving his first remarks; it warmed his blood after the old fashion, and, what was better, it cleared off his nervousness.

"One would think that I had got over asking favours of a brother who had proved himself so har——"

"No," interrupted Geoffry, "not hard—but go on."

"And yet I am here again to ask a second favour, and chance as curt a denial."

"Ah! I did hope, James, that you were here to say 'I was in the wrong to take myself off in a huff, because my brother would not let me fling some of his money after my own,' or, at least to say, 'Glad to see you, Geoffry, and hope to see you more often after this,'—but *favours!*"

"Not for myself, Sir," said Mr. Hinchford, hastily; "don't mistake me—I wouldn't ask a favour for myself to save my life."

"I would to save a shilling; I often do."

"That is the difference between us," Mr. Hinchford answered.

"Exactly the difference. Pray proceed, Jem."

The younger brother softened at the old appellative; he composed his ruffled feathers, and went at it more submissively.

"Look here, Geoffry, I ask a favour for my son. His firm has dissolved partnership——"

"What firm was it?"

Mr. Hinchford told him.

"Smashed, you mean—bad management somewhere—go on."

"And he, who would have been made partner in his twenty-first birthday, has now to begin the world afresh. I thought that you

might know of something suitable for him, and would, remembering our common name, do something for him."

"He's a tetchy young gentleman—what I remember of him, in a flying visit. Who the deuce can he take after, I wonder?" and the banker appeared to cudgel his brains with his pen, as if lost in perplexity as to any trait in the Hinchfords identical with "tetchiness." The father did not detect the irony—perhaps would not at that juncture.

"Well," said the banker, "what general abilities has he?"

Mr. Hinchford burst forth at once. The wrongs of the past were forgotten; the theme was a pleasant one; the abilities of his son were manifold; he could testify to them for the next two hours, if a patient listener were found him. He launched forth into a list of Sid's accomplishments, and grew eloquent upon his son's genius for figures, adaptability for commercial pursuits, his energy, and industry in all things, at all times and seasons.

"This lad ought to be governor of the Bank of England," Geoffry Hinchford broke in with. "There's nothing suitable for such extraordinary accomplishments here. I can only place him at the bottom of the clerks, with a salary of a hundred and twenty to begin with."

"Geoffry, you're very kind," ejaculated his brother; "you mean that—you will really do something for us, after all?"

"Why, you vexatious and frivolous old man," cried the banker, exasperated at last, "I would have always helped you in my own way, if you had not been so thoroughly set upon my helping you in yours. You were hot-headed, and I was ill-tempered and *raspish*, and so we quarrelled, and you—you my only brother—sulked with me for six and twenty years. For shame, Sir!"

The banker evinced a litttle excitement here; he tossed his pen aside and beat his thin fingers on the book; he spoke his mind out, and amazed his brother sitting at a little distance from him.

"Geoffry—I—I didn't sulk exactly. But you were a rich man, and I was left poor; and if you remember, when I came here last I——"

"If I listen any more to that story, I'm damned!" cried the banker; "it's dangerous ground, and if we get upon it, we shall begin sparring again. Now, Sir—look here."

He stood up, and began laying down the law with the fingers of his right hand in the palm of his left.

"I swallowed my pride by coming to Great Suffolk Street in search of you—that was my turn. We were to sink the past, and be friends, I thought; we two foolish old septuagenarians, with nothing to quarrel about. You swallowed your pride—a larger pill than mine, Jem, for it nearly choked you in the attempt—by coming here, and now it's your turn—eh?"

He held forth both his hands suddenly towards his brother, who

answered the appeal by placing his own within them, and holding them in a nervous trembling grasp.

"Amen!" said the banker; and the younger and weaker man understood what he meant, and felt the tears in his eyes.

"And now, I have heard a great deal of your son—you shall see mine."

He left his brother, touched a hand-bell, and a servant immediately responded.

"Ask Mr. Maurice to step here a moment."

"Yes, Sir."

Exit servant; enter very quickly a tall young man of about thirty years of age, fresh-coloured, well-formed, with curly brown hair, and a long brown moustache, "making tracks," as the Americans say, for his shoulders.

"Maurice, here's your obstinate uncle come to see us at last."

"I am glad to see *you*, Sir; I think the difference has lasted long enough."

Uncle and nephew shook hands; Mr. Hinchford thought this nephew was a fine young fellow enough—not like his Sid, but a very passable and presentable young fellow notwithstanding.

"We're going to try your cousin as a clerk, Maurice. Any objection?"

"Not in the least," was the ready answer.

"We shall not claim relationship over the ledgers," intimated Geoffry Hinchford; "if he's clever, he'll get on—if he's a fool, he'll get the sack. And we don't expect him after the general fashion of relations, to cry out, 'See how my uncle and cousin are serving me, their own flesh and blood, by not lifting me over the heads of the staff, and making my fortune at once!'"

"Sid wants no favours, Sir," said Mr. Hinchford, sharply.

"After office hours we shall remember that he's a Hinchford, perhaps," said the banker. "Send him when you like, James."

"To-morrow, Geoffry, if you will."

"He's sure to come, I suppose?" asked his brother. "Is he aware of your visit here to-day?"

"No."

"Ah! then it's doubtful, I think. By Gad! I shan't forget in a hurry his sermon to me, and his flourish of trumpets over his own independence."

"He will come, Sir, I think."

"Out of place makes a difference," remarked the banker; "we shall see. And now, what can I do for you, James?"

"Oh! nothing, nothing," he said, hastily; "I ask no favours for myself—I'm doing well, thank you—very well indeed! Where's my stick and hat? I—I think I'll bid you good morning, now, Geoffry."

"I shall see you again, I daresay; I can always send a message to

you by your son, who will be here to-morrow, pernaps. Good-bye, old fellow—Maurice, see to your uncle."

Maurice Hinchford, noticing the feeble steps of the new relation, offered his arm, which was declined, by a hasty shake of the head.

"I'm strong enough, Sir, but the meeting has upset me just a little. Geoffry," turning back to address his brother, "we won't say anything more about that old affair—I think you meant well, after all."

"I hope I did. Good day."

"Good day, brother."

Maurice closed the door behind his uncle.

"He's getting quite the old man," said Mr. Hinchford to his nephew; "he had an iron nerve once. He seems very feeble to me—does he enjoy good health?"

"Oh! first rate health—he's a strong man for his age, Mr. Hinchford. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps he is. You can't expect him like myself, eight years younger than he."

"Well, no," said the nephew, drily.

"He ought not to worry himself about business at his age; why, I have given it up myself," he added.

"Oh! indeed!"

Business had given him up; but the old man did not think of it that moment. He was anxious to show the Hinchfords in the best light possible, lest Sid should be looked down upon too much when he came to his new berth.

"And your father must feel the cares of business a little?"

"Not a bit," said Maurice; "he wouldn't be happy out of the bank! He's strong and well, thank God, and one of the best-hearted men and fathers in the world. Too good a father, by half, for that matter!"

"How's that?"

"Oh! it's difficult to explain," was the answer of the nephew, whose cheeks flushed a little at the question; "you'll excuse me now uncle. Through here, and straight across the office—good day."

He shook hands with Mr. Hinchford, and left him at the door of the inner office which the old gentleman had passed through half an hour since, less hopeful of good fortune in store for the Boy!

CHAPTER V.

"THE NEW BERTH."

Mr. Hinchford scarcely maintained an equable demeanour until Sidney's return; the burden of good news was almost too much for him, and just to wile away the time, and experience the blessed privilege of telling a good story twice, he found out Ann Packet and enlightened her as to the new chance that was presented to Sid.

When Sidney returned, and informed his father that there was no news, Mr. Hinchford bade him not despair, for good luck was sure to turn up in one direction or another.

"Despair!" cried Sidney, cheerfully; "why, I haven't dreamed of despairing yet! Is it likely?"

"Shall I tell you some bad news, Sid?"

"Out with it!"

Mr. Hinchford detailed his dismissal from service at the builder's office. Sidney looked a little discomfited at first, but clapped his father on the shoulder heartily.

"We can bear it—you and I together. You'll be better away from business, and have your health better. I shall be strong enough for the two of us, Sir."

"Good lad—but if nothing turns up."

"Oh! but it will!"

"And, oh! but it has!" cried the father; "now for the good news, Sid, which I have been keeping back till it has nearly burst me."

Mr. Hinchford exploded with his confession, and Sidney listened not unmoved at it. In his heart he had grown dispirited, though not despondent, and the news was grateful to him, and took a load therefrom which had seemed to become a little heavier every day. He would have preferred a clerkship away from his relation's office; but his pride was not so great as his common sense, and he saw the advantages which might accrue to him from an earnest application to business. He remembered, with a slight feeling of discomfort, his past hauteur to the man from whom he now accepted service; but he had had a fall since then, and the hopes of that time—with one bright exception—had been bubble-blown, and met the fate of bubbles. He had been too sanguine; now he was matter-of-fact, and

must proceed coolly to work. He had ten years to work in—what would be the end of them? His heart had sunk a little; upon cool reflection he began to doubt whether he had acted well in confiscating the affections of one to whom he might never be able to offer a home.

Still he judged Harriet Wesden by himself, and judged her rightly. If she loved him for himself, she would not care what money he brought her; and if his affection were selfish, knowing what an end to a love story his life must be, he had concealed nothing from her, and the truth had only drawn her closer to him. He felt that that was his one hope, and he could not be magnanimous enough to insist upon its dissolution, and of the unfitness of his prospects to her own. When the time came round and left him penniless; or when he saw, three or four years hence, that there was no chance of saving money, and he remained still the clerk with an income that increased not, it would be time to resign her—not now, when she loved him, and he was happy in her smiles, and understood her, as he thought, so well.

He entered upon his novitiate at his uncle's banking-house; his father had not reiterated the hint which Geoffry Hinchford had given him about relationship, but Sid was a young man who knew his place, and who kept it, and rather shunned his relations than forced himself upon them.

Uncle and nephew proved themselves very different beings to what Sidney had imagined; they were kind to him in their way—they were even anxious he should do the family name credit; they watched his progress, and were quick enough to see that he would prove a valuable and energetic auxiliary.

Geoffry Hinchford was pleased at his nephew's reticence, and took note of it as he had taken note of most things during his earthly pilgrimage. He even condescended to give him a little advice in the shape of a warning one day.

"Sidney," he said, when chance brought them together in that bank back parlour, "how do you like your cousin Maurice for a master?"

"He is very kind to me."

"Ah! that's it—that's his fault. When I'm gone, I have a fear that he will make a muddle of the bank with his easiness. He's the best son that ever lived, I think, but he's too easy."

Sidney did not consider himself warranted in replying to this.

"So take my advice, Sidney, and steer clear of him as much as you can," he said,

"I don't think that the advice is needed, Sir. Our position—"

"Fiddle-de-dee—he never cared for position, and, unfortunately, he's taken a fancy to you. The scamp wanted to double your salary yesterday, without any rhyme or reason, only relationship. Foolish, wasn't it?"

"Well, I don't deserve any increase of salary yet, Sir—it has not been fairly earned," was the frank answer.

"Exactly—now listen to me. I think it is just possible that Mr. Maurice may forget that your salary is small, and that you have a father to keep. Let me tell you that he is an expensive acquaintance, and a little removed from your sphere."

"I know it, Sir."

"Some day it may be different—we can't tell what may happen, but take care of him for a while. A noble young fellow, a good business man in business hours, but not calculated to improve your mercantile abilities by a closer acquaintance."

Sidney Hinchford considered the warning somewhat of a strange one, and even for a while did his uncle the half-injustice to believe that he spoke more in fear of Maurice "lowering" himself, than on account of his nephew forming expensive acquaintances. But Sid soon found the warning worth attending to. It happened, at times, that Sidney Hinchford had extra work after the bank was closed, and the majority of clerks had departed. His cousin Maurice, who always remained long after his father had gone—he rented apartments in London, whilst his father went off by train every afternoon to Red-Hill—did occasionally, in the early days of their acquaintance, come to Sid's desk and watch his labours for a few minutes, very intently.

"What are you going to do with yourself to-night, Sidney?"

"I am going home, Mr. Maurice."

"Come and dine with me at my club, and take pity upon my loneliness."

"Thank you—but my father will be expecting me home."

"Oh! the governor can't expect you, at your age, to be always turning up to five o'clock teas."

"You must excuse me, if you please."

"Well, if you'll give me one plain answer to the next question, I won't press it."

"I'll give it you."

"Isn't there a young lady your way, as well as the governor?"

"Yes," was the quick answer.

"By Jove! if I didn't think so. Ah! you're a gay deceiver, Sidney, after the bank doors have closed upon you."

On another occasion, and under similar circumstances, he said, in a quick, abrupt way, that almost bordered on embarrassment—

"Has your father any property of his own?"

"No."

"Your salary supports yourself and him entirely?"

"Yes, and leaves something to spare."

Maurice whistled, took up a lead pencil on Sidney's desk, and began scribbling with it on his finger nails. Suddenly he laid the pencil down, saying—

"Oh! that's a thundering sight too bad, old fellow!—we're all Hinchfords, and must alter that. How are you going to marry?—and when?"

"In the usual fashion—and in ten years' time."

"That's an engagement that will never come to anything, then."

"How do you know?"

"Because long engagements seldom do—and no man, to my fancy, has a right to tie a girl down to such horrible agreements."

"It can't be helped, Maurice," said Sid, a little sadly.

"I'd start in business. Are you too proud for trade?"

"I don't care about retail—selling ha'porths of something across the counter, wearing white aprons, and so on," replied Sidney; "it's very wrong of me, but it's the Hinchford pride that bars the way, I suppose."

"Try wholesale on a small scale, as a start—the old tea business, for instance."

"Don't you think that I am fit for this, Mr. Maurice?"

"Yes, but it takes time to rise, and you mean marrying. Now, to my fancy, you are a man who would do better in commerce."

"Ah! but then there's capital to sink by way of a beginning."

"I can lend you a thousand pounds—a couple of thousands. I'm a very saving man, Sidney—I'm as certain that you would pay me back again as that I'm standing here."

"You're very kind murmured Sidney," taken aback by this liberal offer; "but—but, it can't be done."

"Borrow it from my father and me—as your bankers, if you will. My father will not say no to it, I fancy—and if he does, why, there's the other resource just alluded to."

Sidney was still bewildered, and at a loss to account for the offer. For an instant he was even tempted; there rose before him the one chance of his life, the happiness of his life with Harriet, forestalled by years—and then he put his hands out, as though to push all dangerous thoughts away.

"Thank you—thank you—" he said; "but when I speculate, it must be with my own money. I will not start in life burdened by a heavy debt. You're very kind—far too kind to me, Sir."

"A Hinchford—I never forget that. You don't know how proud I am of my family, and all its belongings. And, joking apart, Sidney, we really are a fine family, every one of us! And you'll not—well, subject postponed, *sine die;* the bank isn't such a bad place, and we shall give a lift to your salary when you deserve it. Not before, mind," he added, with a seriousness that made Sidney smile, who remembered the anecdote related by the senior partner.

Sidney Hinchford was touched by his rich cousin's efforts to promote his interests, by his frankness, his *bonhomie*. Though he held himself aloof from him, yet he respected, even admired

him. There was not a man in the banking office who did not admire Mr. Maurice Hinchford; he had a good word for even the porter; he treated his servants liberally; he was always ready to promote their interests; the cares of money-making, and taking care of other people's money, had never soured his temper, or brought a dark look to his face.

This was the father's anxiety, that Maurice was too easy—that nothing put him out of temper, or chased away the smiles from his good-looking countenance; the banker was glad to see his son happy, but he did wish now and then that Maurice had looked at life less frivolously, and been more staid and sober in his ways. The banker was glad to see him generous—although, if the fit seized him, Maurice was a trifle too liberal with his cheques, for natural wants, bequests, and monuments; but he was not a spendthrift, and even put money by, from the princely share of the profits which he received twice a year.

Certainly it would have been difficult for a single man to run through it without sheer gambling at green tables, or on green turfs; and Maurice Hinchford never betted on the red and black, and hated horsy people. He spent all the money a man could honestly get through; he fared sumptuously every day, and dressed figuratively in purple and fine linen; it was his boast that he had the best of everything around him, and anything second-rate had been his abomination from a child; he was a Sybarite, to whom luck had been wafted, and he enjoyed life, and cared not for the morrow, on the true Sybarite principle. But he was not a proud man; he was fastidious in a few things—young ladies of his circle generally, and the mothers of those young ladies especially, thought him much too fastidious—but he was a man whom men and women of all classes liked, and whom his servants idolised.

It was no wonder that his pleasant manners had their effect upon Sidney, who had found few of his own sex to admire in the world, and who knew that the man of whose energy everyone spoke well was of his own kith and kin. He held himself aloof, knowing that his ways were not Maurice's ways. When the rich cousin once asked why he so rigidly refused every offer to join him at his club, to make one of a little party at the opera, sharing his box with him, and put to no expense save a dress-coat and white choker, he confessed the reason in his old straightforward manner.

"You're too well-off for me—I can't be your companion, and I'll not be patronised and play the toady. It looks bad in business here, and it will look worse apart from it."

"You're a regular stoic!"

After a while Mr. Geoffry Hinchford again asked his nephew what he thought of Maurice.

"A warm-hearted and a generous man whom I am proud to think is a cousin of mine."

"Yes—just as you say. And very proud I am, too, to think that this dashing handsome young fellow is a son of mine. He has all the virtues except one, under Heaven, Sidney."

"We're not all perfect, Sir," said Sidney, laughing.

"Oh! but you are, according to my brother James—he won't see even a flaw in your armour," said the old banker, acrimoniously; "but then he always was aggravating me with something or other—and now it's you."

"I hope not, Sir."

"Well, well, only in one sense of the word. And Maurice has, after all, but a little foible, which the world—the real, material world—always makes allowance for. He will grow out of it. Good evening."

Sidney did not inquire concerning Maurice Hinchford's foibles, little or otherwise—he knew that foibles were common to humanity, and that humanity is lenient respecting them. He did not believe that there was any great wrong likely to affect the brilliancy of Maurice Hinchford's character—he would be content to resemble his cousin, he thought, if he were ever a rich man like unto him, an honest, amiable English gentleman.

Sidney did not covet his cousin's riches, however; he knew that fortune was not reserved for him, and if he were scarcely content with his lot in life, he was at least thankful for all mercies that had been vouchsafed to him, though he kept his thanks to himself for the greater part.

"If he were scarcely content!" we have said, for Sidney was ambitious of rising by his own merits in the world; a laudable ambition, for which we need not upbraid him. He was careful of his money, a characteristic from his boyhood, a trait that his father, who had been never careful, took great pains to develop. He sank his pride completely for the sake of saving money, and he did save a little, despite the small income, the house-keeping expenditure, and his father to support. On Saturday nights he toiled home from the cheapest market with a huge bag of groceries, to the disgust of the suburban tea-dealer—who wanted a hundred per cent. profit on an indifferent article—and walked with his head rather higher in the air than usual when heavily laden.

"When I can afford it, the goods shall be brought to my door," he said, when his father once urged a faint remonstrance; "but I can't study appearances on a hundred and twenty pounds a year. Those fellow-clerks of mine can drop my acquaintance on a Saturday night, and pass by on the other side, if they are inclined. I shall carry my big parcels and exult in my independence all the same."

"Yes, but the look of the thing, Sid."

"We'll study that some day, if we have the chance. *We must keep our eyes open,* till the chance comes."

"I did think once that you had all the Hinchford pride in you, Sid."

"I have a fair share, Sir," was the answer, "and I never feel prouder than when I am carrying my plethoric bag under my arm. Proud of myself, and of the property I have invested in."

"Then I don't see why I should complain."

"You—to be sure not. Put on your hat, and let us go round to Mr. Wesden's, and make up our whist party."

And in this quiet way—winding up the evenings with whist playing and love-making—the time stole on.

END OF BOOK THE FOURTH.

BOOK V.

STORM SIGNALS.

CHAPTER I.

CAST DOWN.

Meanwhile Mattie, the stray, must absorb our attention for a while. In following the fortunes of the Hinchfords, we have omitted to watch closely the progress of our heroine. Yes, our heroine—if we have not called attention to that fact before—and with many first-class "heroinical" qualities, which would do credit to the high-born damsels of our old-fashioned novels. She had been heroine enough to make a sacrifice for Harriet Wesden; to take an unfair share of blame for Harriet's sake, and, therefore, she ranks as "first-lady" in this romance of business-life. She had made the sacrifice of her good name—for it amounted to that—with a sharp struggle; but then she would have given up her life for those to whom her better nature had taught her to be grateful. The girl's love for all who had rescued her from the evil of the past was ever intense, led her to strange actions, kept her hovering in the distance round the friends she had had once. Hers was a nature strangely susceptible to affection, and that affection was not uprooted because ill-report set its stigma upon her. Hers was a forgiving nature, also, and she thought even kindly of Mr. Wesden when the first shock was over, and she had judged him by that true character which she understood so well.

In her new estate Mattie was not happy; she was alone in the world, and we know that she was partial to society, and not always

disinclined to hear the sound of her own musical voice. But she was not disconsolate; she made the best of her bad bargain, and set to work, in her humble way, with something of that doggedness of purpose for which her friend Sidney was remarkable. She had struggled hard for a living but had never given way. She had met obstacles in her path, which would have crushed the energy out of most women, but which she surmounted, not without wounds and loss of strength, and even health, and then went on again. She was matter-of-fact and honest, and those who had doubted her at first—for she had chosen her dwelling-place but a very little way from Great Suffolk Street, and the rumours of a lying tongue followed her, and set her neighbours and fellow-lodgers against her—soon understood her, for the poor are great observers and good judges of character.

In the poor neighbourhood wherein she had settled down, she asked for advice as to the best method of leading an honest life, and received it from her landlady. She turned dress-maker, and when customers came not with a grand rush to Tenchester Street, she asked if she might learn her landlady's business, artificial flower-making, and offered her services gratuitously, until it pleased her mistress to see that she was the handiest "help" she possessed. Then her health failed, for she worked hard, lived hard, and had hard thoughts to contend with; and when the doctor told her that sedentary pursuits would not agree with her, she went a step lower for a while, and even sold play-bills at the doors of a minor theatre to keep the wolf from *her* door.

Mattie had one fear of seeing her money melt away to the last farthing, and being left in the world penniless and friendless, as in the days of her desolate childhood. She had no fear of temptation besetting her in her poverty—for ever she was above that—but she did not wish to die poor, to seek the workhouse, or to be reminded in any way of her past estate. She *would* be above that; she was ever hoping to show Mr. Wesden that she was honest and respected; she struggled vehemently against the tide, and earned her own living at least, varying the mode very often as her quick wits suggested; but never idle, and rising or sinking with the seasons, as they proved fair or sharp ones with the working classes.

It had been a fair season when she called on Mr. Hinchford last, and she had even found courage to give Ann Packet her address; the sharp season set in after that, and, though Ann Packet in her monthly visits was deceived by Mattie's manner, yet it became another struggle for bread with our heroine. For the season was not only sharp, but Mattie gave way in health over her work for a rascally waistcoat-maker, who drove hard bargains, and did not believe in Charity covering a multitude of sins. And with an opposition clothier over the way, who sported a glass chandelier,

and sold fancy vests for three and sixpence, it *was* hard to believe in anything.

Mattie gave way more than she intended to acknowledge to Ann Packet, had not that indefatigable young woman made her appearance unexpectedly, and found Mattie in bed at six in the evening.

"Good lor! what's this?"

"Nothing, Ann—only a little cold, which I have been recommended to nurse for a day," said Mattie; "don't look so scared!"

"But why wasn't I to know it?—I might have brought in something good for you," bemoaned Ann; "if I'm to be kep in the dark, who's to take care of you, my gal?"

"I'm taking very good care of myself, Ann."

"What *are* you taking?"

"Oh! all manner of things; won't you believe me?"

"No—I won't."

And Ann proceeded to inspect mantelpieces, open cupboards and drawers, to Mattie's dismay.

"Yes, I see just how it be," she said, after her search had resulted in nothing satisfactory. "You're working yourself to death, and starving yourself to death, without saying anything to anybody. And that's gratitude for all my love to you—you who want to leave me alone in the world, with not no one to love."

"Why, my dear Ann, I'm not going to die."

"You're trying all you can; oh! you ungrateful gal!"

Mattie defended herself, and maintained that it was only one "lay up," but Ann Packet did not like the red spot on each cheek, the unnatural brightness of the eyes, and secretly doubted her assertion.

"I must go back now. I shall come to-morrow, first thing."

"I shall be well enough to-morrow, Ann."

Ann Packet kissed her and departed; half an hour afterwards, to Mattie's astonishment, she made her reappearance, accompanied by a tall, slim gentleman.

"There's the gal, Sir. Now, please tell me what's the matter, and don't mind *her* a bit."

Mattie saw that it was too late to offer a resistance, and refrained, like a wise young woman, from "making a scene." The doctor felt her pulse, looked at her tongue, took the light from the table and held it close to Mattie's face.

"Well—what's the matter, Sir?" was Mattie's question.

"Humph! don't know that I can tell exactly, yet. I'll look in to-morrow."

"No, don't do that," said Mattie, alarmed at the expense.

"Yes, do," cried Ann Packet, "your money's safe, Sir. Look to me at 34, Chesterfield Terrace, Camberwell, for it. I'm a respectable maid-of-all-work, with money in the bank."

"It's of no consequence," muttered the doctor; but he entered the address in his note-book, like a man of business as he was.

"Shan't I be well to-morrow, Sir?" asked Mattie, anxiously.

"Humph!—scarcely to-morrow, I think."

"Why don't you say what it is?—do you think I'm likely to be frightened at it, even if it's death, Sir? Why, I've lived down all fright at anything long ago."

"It's a little attack of scarlatina, I think," he answered, thus adjured.

"You only think?"

"Well, then, I'm sure."

"She's had it afore, you know," Ann Packet suggested, "when she was a child. I thought people couldn't have these nasty things twice."

"Oh! yes."

"That's enough, then," said Ann Packet, taking off her bonnet and shawl, and putting them on the table as centre ornaments; "here I sticks till you're better."

"Ann—Ann Packet!" cried Mattie.

"Ah! you may say what you like, I shan't move. When this gentleman's gone we'll quarrel about it—not afore."

The gentleman alluded to took his departure, promising to send round some medicine in a few minutes. Mattie looked imploringly at the obdurate Ann.

"You *must* go home, Ann."

"Not a bit of it, my dear," said Ann; "I have knowed you for too long a time to leave you in the lurch like this, for all the places in the world. And it isn't that I haven't knowed the Hinchfords long enough, to think they'll mind."

Mattie sighed.

"But you keep quiet, my dear, and fancy I'm your mother taking care on you—which I wish I was. And I'll send a boy to Camberwell to tell 'em why I ain't a coming back just yet."

"Let me write a——"

"Let you keep yourself quiet, and don't worry me. I'm going to manage you through this."

"You're very good, Ann," said Mattie; "but if you catch the fever of me!"

"Lor bless you! I shan't catch no fever—I'm too old for changing colour, my dear. You might as well expect buff-leather to catch fevers. But don't you remember how skeered I was once when you came in piping hot with it from Kent Street? Ah! I was vain of my good looks then, and afraid they might be spiled."

Ann Packet had been a girl with a bat-catching-against-wall kind of countenance all her life, but distance lent enchantment to the view of the merry days when she was young. And Ann Packet's

will was absolute, and carried all before it. Mattie was bowed down by it; she felt weaker than usual, and too ill to assert supremacy in her own house. Giving up, she thought that it was comfortable to have a friend at her side and to feel that the loneliness of a few hours since was hers no longer.

Ann Packet went down stairs, and found a boy prepared—for twopence down and twopence when he came back—to deliver any message within a radius of fifty miles from Tenchester Street. The messenger departed, returning, in due course, with a favourable, even a kind reply. Ann Packet was to take her own time, and a girl would be found to assist until Mattie was better. Mattie read the note to Ann.

"There, didn't I say so?"

"It's in Mr. Sidney's handwriting," said Mattie, putting the letter under her pillow; "he's always kind and thoughtful."

"Ah! he is."

"As kind and thoughtful as ever, I suppose, Ann?"

"Lor bless you!—yes."

"What a long while it seems since——"

"Since you've held *your* tongue," added Ann. "Yes, it does. I'd keep quiet a bit now, if I was you."

Thus adjured, Mattie relapsed into silence, and Ann Packet, thinking her charge was asleep, stole out of the room a short while afterwards, and went into the streets marketing. In the night the fever gained apace with our heroine; the next day the doctor pronounced her worse—enjoined strict quietness and care.

"He seems afraid of me," said Mattie, after he had gone, "as if there were anything to be alarmed at, even if I did die. Why, what could be better for me, Ann?"

"Oh! don't—oh! dont."

"Not that I'm going to die; I don't feel like it," said Mattie. "I can see myself getting strong again, and fighting," she added, with a little shudder, "my battles again. There, Ann, you need not look so scared; I won't die to please you."

It was a forced air of cheerfulness, put on to raise the spirits of her nurse; and succeeded to a certain extent in its object, although Ann told her not to go on like that—it wasn't proper.

Mattie lay and thought of the chances for and against her that day. What if that burning fever and increasing restlessness gained the mastery? who would be the worse for her loss? and might not she, with God's help, be the better? She was scarcely a religious woman; but the elements of true religion were within her, and only biding their time. She was honest, pure-minded, anxious to do good for others, bore no one malice, and forgave all trespasses against her—she went to chapel every Sunday—and she did not feel so far off from Heaven on that sick bed. She thought once or twice that she would be glad to die, if she were sure of the future happiness of

those for whom she had lived. She would like to know the end of the story, and then—*rest*. She could not die without seeing the old faces, though, and therefore she must make an effort to exist for her own sake.

In the evening, Ann Packet, looking a little scared, said—

"Here's a gentleman come to see you. It's not quite right for him to come up, I'm thinking."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Hinchford."

"*Old* Mr. Hinchford?"

"No, the young one."

Mattie, even with the scarlatina, could blush more vividly.

"Mr.—Mr. Sidney!" she gasped. "Oh! he musn't come in here."

"Musn't he, though!" said the deep voice of Sidney, from the other side of the room. "Oh! he's not at all bashful, Mattie."

Sidney Hinchford came into the room and walked straight to the bed where Mattie was lying—where Mattie was crying just then.

"Why, Mattie!—in tears!"

"Only for a moment, Mr. Sidney. It is very kind of you to come and see me—and you have taken me by surprise, that's all."

"She's to be kept quiet, Sir," said Ann.

"I'll not make much noise," he answered.

He stood by the bed-side, looking down at the stricken girl. The change in her, the thin face, the haggard looks, increased as they were by illness, had been a shock to Sidney Hinchford, though he did his best to disguise all evidence from her.

"Go and sit there for the little while you must remain in this room," said Mattie, indicating a chair by the window, at some distance. "You were rash to come into this place."

"I'm not afraid of fever, Mattie, and I was not going to lose a chance of seeing you—the first chance I have had."

"And you don't think that I have been wrong, Mr. Sidney?" asked Mattie; "you haven't let all that Mr. Wesden has said turn you against me? I'm so glad!"

"Mattie, there's a little mystery, but I daresay you can clear it—and I swear still by the old friend and adviser of Great Suffolk Street. And as for Mr. Wesden—why, I'm inclined to think that that old gentleman is growing ashamed of himself."

"You say nothing of Harriet?"

"She's the champion of *all* absent friends—the best girl in the world. When I tell her that you——"

"You must not tell her where to find me—you will not act fairly by her, if you thrust her into danger, Sir. I rely upon you to keep her away."

"Well, you women do catch things very rapidly," said he; "I—I think that perhaps it will be as well not to let her know of your illness."

"Thank you—thank you."

"But when you are well again, I shall bring her myself to see you. We'll have no more games at hide and seek, Mattie."

"Not yet."

"Why—not yet?" was the quick answer.

"I am no fit companion for her—her father thinks. So it must not be. I have seen her—watched for her several times."

"Ah!—I suppose so. You know that we are engaged, Mattie?" he said; "that was an old wish of yours, Harriet tells me."

"Yes; when are you to be married?"

"Oh! when I can afford to keep a wife. Shall I tell you how I am getting on now?"

"I should like to hear it," said Mattie, "but you musn't stop here very long. For there *is* danger."

"I don't believe it," said he, laughing; "besides, my father has furnished me with a lump of camphor as big as my head, which I've been sitting on the last five minutes. Now, Mattie, let me tell you where I am, and what I am doing."

In a few words, Sidney sketched the particulars of his present mode of life, spoke of his prospects *in futuro*, and of the kindness which he received at all hands. He was an agreeable companion, and brought some of his vigour and good spirits into that little room with him. He spoke cheerfully and heartily, and the pleasant ring of his voice sounded like old times to Mattie. She lay and listened, and thought it was all very comfortable—she even forgot her fever for a while, till she remembered the length of time that he had remained with her.

"I hope you will go now," she said, rather suddenly.

"Am I wearying you?—I beg pardon, Mattie. Some of these days when you are better, I intend a longer stay than this."

"Indeed!"

"I shall try my own powers of persuasion, in order that Harriet and I may fight your battles better for you," he said; "we must clear up that mystery—I hate mystery."

"I know it."

"Upon my honour, I would as soon have a sister maligned as you!" cried Sidney; "we are such old friends, Mattie."

"Yes, yes—go now, please. And keep Harriet away, for her own sake and yours."

Sidney promised that, and then shook hands with her.

"You must not be very shocked at my stalking in here—fancy it is your brother, Mattie. I shall make Harriet a clean confession when I get back—not to-night, though."

He went from the room, followed by Ann Packet. Outside,

the cheerful look upon his face suddenly vanished, and he became so grave that Ann Packet stared aghast at him.

"Who's her doctor?"

Ann told him.

"I'll send some one myself to see if he is treating her correctly."

"Don't you—don't you think that she's so well?"

"I think that she's very ill—worse than she is aware of herself. Take care of her, Ann, she's an old friend!"

He went down stairs hastily, and Ann returned to the room to find Mattie in a high fever, sitting up in bed with a wild look in her eyes.

"Ann, Ann—he must never come again! I—I can't bear to see him now."

"Patience, my darling. Keep quiet—why not?"

"Oh! I don't know—but he makes my heart ache—and, and, he is coming into danger here. Oh! Sidney! Sidney!"

She flung herself back in her bed, and sobbed and tossed there till the fever grew upon her more and more, and robbed her of her senses. And in the delirium which followed, Ann Packet learned the secret of Mattie's life, and wrung her hands, and cried over it.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH SEVERAL DISCOVERIES COME TOGETHER.

When Sidney Hinchford called the next morning at Tenchester Street, to inquire after Mattie's health, Ann Packet met him at the door, and informed him that the invalid was worse, and on no account to be disturbed. In the course of the day a new doctor arrived, commissioned by Sidney; and being a man not inclined to pooh-pooh every system but his own, gave his opinion that Mattie was being treated correctly, and he saw nothing to improve upon. So the doctor was not changed; and being a poor man struggling for a living in a little shop round the corner, I hope he was sufficiently grateful, especially as Ann Packet did not require a twelvemonth's

credit, but settled his bill every Saturday night with the washerwoman's.

And three Saturday nights went by before Mattie was considered out of danger of the fever's return, and in rather more imminent danger of the exhaustion which that fever had occasioned. Sidney Hinchford had taken Tenchester Street and Southwark Bridge in his new route to the City, and called every morning for the latest news —Ann Packet had brought it down to him, with Mattie's kind regards and compliments, and he had not been permitted to see her since that night referred to in our last chapter.

Mattie was getting better when the fourth week was over—learning to be strong, anxious about the expenses that had been incurred, solicitous even about her little dress-making connection, which would have flown to the four winds of Heaven had scarlatina thought of taking its measure.

Mattie had found strength to leave her bed and sit up for a while in the chair by the fireside, when the second visitor astonished Tenchester Street by her arrival. No less a visitor than Harriet Wesden herself—who, having learned Mattie's address by degrees from the unfaithful Sidney, had made made an unlooked-for *raid* upon the premises.

"Don't cry—don't speak—don't say anything for ever so long!" she said, with one gloved finger to her pretty mouth; "if there's anything to get over—get over it without any fuss, my dear."

Mattie was silent for a while—she turned her head away and looked at the red coals. This was a meeting that she thought would come some day; that in her heart she did not blame Sidney Hinchford for promoting, although the danger of it rendered her uneasy.

"Farther away, Harriet," she murmured at last.

"I'm not afraid," said Harriet; "I don't believe that I'm of a feverish sort, or that there's any danger. If there were, I should have come all the same, and stopped just as long, after wheedling the address from Sid."

Ann Packet fidgeted about the room; she was jealous of her charge, fearful of Mattie becoming excited, and of Harriet Wesden talking too much to her. Harriet Wesden saw this.

"You may trust me with her, Ann—I will be very careful."

"I hope you will—I shouldn't like the doctor to say I'd let you chatter her off into a fever again. You'll take care, Mattie."

"Yes, Ann."

At the door she paused again.

"You allus were such a gal to talk when once set a-going, Mattie —now docc be as careful as you can! When I come back from marketing, I'll hope it's all done atween you two."

Ann Packet withdrew. The two girls—we may say, despite the

difference of position between them, the two friends—looked at each other for a short while longer. Mattie was the first to speak.

"Now you have come, Harriet, you must tell me all that has happened since we parted—every scrap of news that affects you is always welcome to me."

"Shall I sum it up in three words, that will content you, Mattie?—I am happy."

"I am so glad—so very glad! Harriet," she added, more eagerly, "you do love him? It isn't a fancy, like—like the others?"

"Mattie, I love him with my whole heart—I never loved before—I feel that the past was all romantic folly. You don't know what a noble fellow he is—how kind and thoughtful!"

"Yes—I do."

"Ah! but you don't know him as I know him; the truth of his inner self, the nobleness of his character, the earnestness of his nature! Mattie, I feel that I have deceived him—that I should have told him all about Mr. Darcy, and trusted in his generosity, in his knowledge of me, to believe it. It was a cruel promise that you wrung from me."

"Harriet, I was thinking of your own good name, and of the story that the world would make from yours. I think I was right."

We wiser people, with principles so much higher, think Mattie was wrong, as she thought herself, in the days that were ahead of her.

"And this Mr. Darcy, Harriet, have you seen or heard from him since?"

"I received one letter. I returned it to its writer unopened."

"That was right. And the Eveleighs, what do they know, do you think?"

"Nothing."

"Then we must be safe."

"We?" echoed Harriet. "When you are bearing the stigma of my indiscretion! Mattie, you went out that night in search of me."

"No matter," responded Mattie. "I must not talk too much. Let me hear you speak of all old friends—it's like the old times back again to have you here."

"And they will come back."

"*Never!*" was the solemn reply.

"Not that tiresome shop, perhaps," said Harriet, "but the times like unto the old, and all the better for the difference. You know what a weak and sanguine woman I was."

"Well—yes."

"I am a strong and sanguine woman now, and there are good

times I brood upon, and look forward to still. Shall I sketch you the picture?"

"If you will."

Mattie listened very anxiously; Harriet, with her bonnet in her lap, and her golden hair falling about her shoulders, sat steadfastly looking at our heroine.

"A little cottage somewhere in the country—a long, long way off from this London, which I dislike so much. Sid and I together, and you our faithful friend and housekeeper. Oh! that *will* come true!"

Mattie shook her head.

"I think not."

"Why, you will not desert us!"

"When the time comes round for the cottage, I will give my answer. I think that—I—should—like to come some day—when you have children, perhaps, to take care of *them*. But it is a long, long while to look forward to—almost wicked to build upon, is it not?"

"I don't see where the wickedness lies."

"And as for the country—why in the country, Harriet, when Sidney will have to work in London?"

"He may make his fortune and retire," she said, after a pause.

The secret of Sidney's life was sacred, even from Mattie. Harriet could not dwell upon it without arousing a suspicion.

"I feel that we shall all be together some day—and now, before that day comes, let us speak of something else."

Harriet Wesden hastened to disburthen herself of all the thoughts which she had had concerning Mattie's future mode of living; if it were dress-making, how Harriet could help her to increase the connection—and, whatever it was, how she, Harriet Wesden, must do her best for Mattie.

All this was very pleasant to our heroine, though it troubled her, and almost mastered her at times. Pleasant to witness the evidence of the old love, of no new love having ousted her from a place in Harriet's heart. With the exception of honest Ann Packet, Mattie had earned no affection for herself, and had stood even isolated from it, until Harriet turned to her as her friend, trusted in her, and—did she ever dream it in the days when she ran barefooted through the London streets?—sought advice from her. And then, from that hour, Mattie studied Harriet, saw her weaknesses, and did her best to counteract them; moulded her—though neither knew it, or would have guessed it—anew, and helped to make the true woman which she was at that hour.

Mattie felt glad that she had been ill, now; her illness had brought Harriet to her side, and proved that she had lived in all her thoughts.

They were still talking together in the gloaming when the doctor

called, bowed to Miss Wesden, and then paid attention to his patient.

"It's very dark," said he, after an ineffectual attempt to see Mattie's tongue; "but you're better, I perceive. Keep still, don't trouble yourself about a light, Miss Gray,"—Mattie, for some reason she could have scarcely explained to herself, had assumed the title which Mrs. Watts, in their last meeting, had bestowed upon her—"I have brought a friend to see you to-day, not knowing that you were engaged."

"Who is he?" Mattie inquired.

"A gentleman connected with the chapel—our chapel."

"Indeed!"

"He helps us with the district business when he's in town—and he has been very anxious to see you for the last fortnight, but the young woman who waits upon you said—very rudely, I fear—that she wouldn't have you worried for fifty parsons. May he come in?"

Before Mattie had made up her mind, he came in without permission. It was difficult to distinguish him in the shadowy room, save that he was short and thin, and moved about with extraordinary celerity.

"When the sinner is too weak to go forth in search of the Word, it should be brought to her by all men earnest for sinners' redemption," he said, in a high, hard voice, very unsuitable for an invalid's chamber; "and I trust that Miss Gray will not consider me out of place in coming hither to teach her to be grateful for her recovery."

"She is scarcely recovered yet, Sir," Harriet ventured to suggest.

"What does Miss Gray say?" he said, as though Miss Wesden's word was to be doubted.

"That it is very kind of you to come—but that I am a little weak just at present."

"I called on the doctor—he's not of your opinion—he ought to know best."

"Yes, yes," said the doctor, "but you promised only a few words."

"I am a man of my word," was the brisk answer.

"I beg pardon, I never said that you were not," said the doctor; "but we must be gentle with our patient yet awhile—and she has already been receiving visitors to-day."

"If Miss Gray objects, I will go."

Mattie said that she did not object, and, without further ceremony, the stranger began to pray for her, lowering his voice when he found that he need not shout at the top of his lungs to be heard in that little room, and even praying with some degree of eloquence, and a more than common degree of earnestness, which was some little apology—if not quite enough—for his unwarrantable intrusion

It was a long prayer, and spared no one. The doctor, after waiting five minutes, and finding thanksgivings for recovery, and for shortening his bill, not in his line, took his departure on tiptoe; Mattie listened reverently, with her hands clasped in her lap; Harriet, who had not forgiven the intrusion, thought of Sidney more than the preacher, and threw the latter out in his extempore oration by suddenly poking the fire, and then dropping the poker with a crash into the fire-place. Ann Packet returned from marketing, and found the preacher in the middle of the room on his knees, and disgusted with his tactics, after the many times she had denied him admittance, proceeded to arrange the tea-tray and light the candle, with a noisy demonstrativeness that was perfectly unnecessary.

"Amen" sounded at last, and the little man rose to his feet, over which Ann Packet had twice stumbled, buttoned his black dress coat across his chest, picked up his hat, and proceeded to retire without further words, like a man of business, who, having done his work, was in a hurry to get home. Suddenly he paused, and regarded Harriet Wesden attentively; the light in the room was feeble, and might deceive him, he thought, for, with a quick hand, he caught up the candlestick and held it nearer to her.

"Miss Wesden—surely?"

Harriet saw nothing to recognise in the wiry-haired, high-cheek-boned preacher. He was a stranger to her.

"Yes, Sir."

"It's not a common name, but I presume not connected with the stationer's in Great Suffolk Street?"

"It was once, before my father left the shop."

"The coincidence never struck me before—that's rather odd, for I'm not generally so dull. You don't remember me?"

"I have never met you before."

"Oh! yes—at the Ashford railway station, in the middle of the night—you claimed my protection from a cruel snare that had been laid to entrap you."

"Hush, Sir!—yes, Sir," said Harriet, with a glance at Ann Packet, who, however, was still busy with the tea-things; "I remember you now; you were very kind to me, and took pains to relieve me from a great anxiety."

"And what has become of——"

"I have never seen him," Harriet interrupted.

"And he hasn't sought you out, and——"

"No, he hasn't. Please say no more about it!" she cried to the inquisitive man; "I have forgotten the story. Mattie, ask him to be quiet."

"How's that possible? How can a—*Mattie!*" he ejaculated, suddenly struck by that name, dropping his hat and then putting his foot upon it in his excitement; "your name Mattie, and acquainted

with a Miss Wesden, who lived once in Suffolk Street! And Miss Gray, too!—my name!—Mattie Gray, why, it must be!"

"Must be—what!" gasped Mattie, rising in her chair.

"Keep quiet—you're to be kept quiet—the doctor said so," he stammered, fighting wildly in the air with both hands; "don't alarm yourself—try and guess who I am for the next hour and a half. I'll be back by that time—where's my hat?—good evening."

He turned to dart out of the room, and ran against Sidney Hinchford, who had been standing there an amazed listener—*for how long?*

"Break it to her by degrees before I come," he said to Sidney. "I'm her father—I have been looking for her all over the kingdom. Do me this good turn?"

"One moment—I am going your way. Mattie understands it already."

"Sidney!" cried Harriet.

"I shall be back in a few minutes," he said, and then the local preacher and the banker's clerk went out together.

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

The three women left behind in that little room remained silent from the shock. They were amazed, perplexed. The sudden excitement of the preacher; the strange questions he had asked Harriet Wesden before the name of Mattie had changed the topic of conversation; the presence of Sidney Hinchford as a witness to all this; his abrupt departure with the preacher—all tended to create doubt, and suggest to one, at least, the presence of danger.

Mattie had not given much thought to Sidney Hinchford's appearance; the preacher's excitement, the return of a far-off thought to her, had rendered all that had followed vague and indistinct—the scene had been even too much for her, and she began to slowly close her eyes.

"I think she has been talked and worried to death too much,"

cried Ann running to her; "Miss Harriet, I'd go now, if I were you."

"Perhaps I have remained too long," said Harriet, rising.

"No," said Mattie, feebly, "I have been surprised by all that has just happened. You are not the cause."

"I think I would lie on the bed a little while, Mattie," said Harriet.

"Don't go till I feel better."

Mattie lay on the bed as directed; Harriet did not resume her seat, but stood with one arm on the mantelpiece, looking thoughtfully before her, where no fancy pictures lingered now. There was a long silence. Ann Packet placed some smelling salts in Mattie's hand, and then sat at a little distance watching her. Harriet retained her position until Mattie drew the bed-curtain further back and looked at her.

"I am better now. You will wait till Sidney comes back to fetch you home, Harriet?"

"It is very late. He may not come back."

"He is sure to come," said Mattie; "pray sit down again, and Ann shall make us tea. Harriet, that man is my father."

"Do you really think so?"

"It was all a truth that that horrible woman told me on the day the house was robbed; he has been in search of me; he has found me at last—I shall not be alone in the world ever again!"

"You are glad then, Mattie?"

"Why should I not be?" asked our heroine; "I think that he is a good man—I think that he must have cared for me a little, to have taken so much trouble in his search for me—he will come back soon, and then we shall know all."

"He comes back to your gain and my loss," Harriet was on the point of saying, but checked herself; Mattie was excited enough without the cares of her friend to be added to her own.

It was a silent, thoughtful meal; Ann Packet, absorbed in gloomy reverie, took her tea with stony apathy. She could see that changes were coming towards her also, and the shape that they might assume was hard to guess at. She should lose Mattie, perhaps, and that was sufficient to disturb *her*.

Tea was over, and Mattie had returned to her easy-chair, when a faint rapping was heard at the outer-door. Ann Packet went to the door, and found the preacher there, as she had anticipated.

"Is she prepared—has she guessed?"

"Yes."

"Can I come in?"

"It isn't for the likes of me to say you can't;" and with this evasive reply, Ann Packet opened wide the door and admitted him.

He came in on tiptoe, in a manner strangely at variance with his

former brusque entrance; he turned to Harriet Wesden first, and spoke in a low whisper to her.

"Mr. Hinchford bade me say, Miss Wesden, that he was waiting for you down stairs."

"Thank you—is he——?"

Harriet did not know how to finish her sentence, and left it in its embryo condition. Her face was pale, and her heart was beating violently as she stooped and kissed Mattie.

"Good-bye, dear—I must go now—Sidney is waiting."

"Good-bye—are you not well?" asked Mattie, suddenly.

She was as quick an observer as of yore, and the new expression on Harriet's face suggested the new fear.

"Yes—yes—a little upset by what has happened to-day, that's all. Good-bye." And Harriet Wesden departed hastily.

The preacher put his hat on the floor, silently drew a chair towards Mattie, and then sat down close to her side. Ann Packet from the distance watched them both—saw in an instant the likeness between them, as they sat thus. Both had sharp black eyes, dark hair, thin noses; the general expression of the features was the same, harsher and more prominent in the man; and, therefore, rendering him far from a being whose good looks were apparent.

"Your name is Mattie?—you were at Mr. Wesden's for some years?—he adopted you—he took you from the streets?—previous to his kindness, you were living, off and on, at a Mrs. Watts' of Kent Street, Southwark, where your mother died?"

"Yes," answered Mattie.

"The woman who died in Kent Street, Southwark, was my wife. She and I started in life together happily enough till she took to drink—oh! the drink! the drink!—and then home became a misery, and we quarrelled very much, and I took to drink myself. I lost my place through drink, and laid the fault to her—we quarrelled worse than ever, as we became poorer and more wretched; I struck her, fought with her, acted the brute until she ran away from me, taking you with her, then but a year old. I did not seek to find her out—I let her go to ruin, and went my own way to ruin myself, until rescued by a miracle—by a good man, whom God sent in my way to amend my life, and teach me all the truths which I had neglected. He found me work again; he raised me from the brute into the man; he altered me body and soul, and when he died, it struck me that I might follow in his steps, and do good unto others, after his example. I was not an unlearned man in all respects; I fancied that I might do good by an effort—there is no doing good without one—and I made the attempt. When I was rewarded by my first convert, Mattie, that was my encouragement," he said, rising with the earnestness of his topic, sitting down again, and flinging his arms wildly about; "that was my incentive to go on, to save fresh souls from the danger, to struggle in the by-ways of life, for the

light which the evil one would for ever shut from us. And I was rewarded for the effort; I have done good; I have spent the last sixteen years of my life in the good cause!"

"You are a minister."

"A local preacher—wandering from place to place, as my employers dictate—occasionally proceeding on my own route; for ever astir, and letting not the sun go down upon my idleness. And all this, while I have been in search of you—tracking your mother at last to Kent Street, and following on your track until I am rewarded thus!"

He held forth his hand and Mattie placed hers within it.

"I think that you are my father," she said; "I am glad to find some one to care for me at last."

"And you will care for *me?*—for I have been a lonely man in the world for many years, and would make atonement for the evil act which cast you to the streets! But Mattie, look at me!"

Mattie regarded him long and steadfastly. It was a strange, hard-featured face, on which was impressed firmness, or obduracy, and little else; but she felt that he was to be trusted and believed.

"You see a very stubborn man, one who has made few friends in life, and who has met with much tribulation in his journey," said he; "you see a man who will do his duty by you, but will not be a gentle father—a man who will never win a daughter's love, and will not let the daughter take the first place in his heart, lest she should wean him too much from the pursuit of sin, and slacken his zeal in the good cause. A man who is poor cannot offer you a home much better than this—a man disagreeable, irritable, and obstinate—is he worth calling father?"

"Yes."

"Thank God you say so; it is very horrible to feel alone in the world."

The disagreeable, irritable, and obstinate man, shook Mattie by both hands, kissed her suddenly on the forehead, drew forth a cotton handkerchief, and wiped his eyes and blew his nose vigorously; finished by producing a shabby leather purse, and taking some silver therefrom, which he placed on the mantelpiece.

"My child!—at my expense all future housekeeping. Young woman," to Ann Packet, "you'll draw from that small amount for the future."

"I'm sure I shan't!"

"Eh!—what?"

"I've taken care of her, and been a mother to her for the last four weeks, and you're not a-coming in here all at once, and stealing every bit of comfort away from me!"

"Who is this?" he asked of Mattie.

"A faithful friend without whom I might have died."

"Then she must be a friend of mine—young woman, you hear that?"

"Ah! I hear," said the stolid Ann.

"And who knows but that you, Mattie, in the better days in store for you and me, may become a worker in the vineyard also?"

"She's not going to work in any yard yet awhile, if I know it!" said Ann.

Mr. Gray rose and picked up his hat again, without paying heed to this allusion.

"I have work to do at home," he said; "I am a mechanic by trade, and have to labour to get my own living; when you are well enough, you must come to my home and make it a different place. I have much to ask you when you are better—I have been troubled about stories that have been told me of you—I am unhappy till I know the truth. You will keep nothing from me?"

Mattie did not reply; that was a matter for future consideration.

"I never allow anything to be kept from me," he said sharply; "I shall be a hard father, rely upon it. I allow nothing for prevarication, and I spare no sin or weakness, however plausible may be the excuse which the sin offers. I—how dreadfully askew everything is on this mantelpiece!" he added suddenly, putting the few ornaments thereon at regular distances from each other; "I shall not be a kind father—I know I shan't! The mountains are not harder to move than I am—you're not frightened at me, Mattie?"

"No."

"Not sorry I have come here to claim you?"

"No—glad," said Mattie; "I think I shall be able to trust you, and to understand you in a little while. And the world will never be entirely desolate again."

"Neither for you nor for me—though I have had my pursuits, and been working hard for my master on earth—my Master in Heaven. Amen. He has been very kind to me to reward me thus for the little which I have done of late years!"

He was down on his knees in the old place, and praying again; offering a thanksgiving for his daughter's restoration to him. He was a man who cared not for appearances—who doubtless rendered himself extremely ridiculous and objectionable at times—and yet a man so thoroughly in earnest, that it was hard to laugh at him. At first sight it was difficult to understand him, although Mattie already felt confidence in him, and saw a brighter life in store for her; he was a man whose character was hard to define at a first interview.

The time was inappropriate; the prayer out of place; he might have waited till he had got home, thought Ann; but after a while

the deep voice arrested attention, and Mattie listened and was impressed by the man's fervour and rugged eloquence. It was not a long prayer; he was on his feet again, and looking at his daughter once more.

"I shall come to-morrow—next week perhaps we shall be living together, father and child! Dear me, how odd that sounds now! With you at my side, I feel I can confront my enemies better."

"Your enemies?"

"Such as they are—I'm not afraid of them—I rather like them," he added; "they laugh at me, and mimic my ways—shrug their shoulders, and tell one another what a hypocrite I am. It's the easiest thing in the world to say a man is a hypocrite, and the very hardest for that man to prove that he is not. But we'll talk about that, and about everything else when you're better. I—I hope I haven't been *going it* too much—good-bye."

"Good-bye, father."

"Ah! that's very good of you," he said; "but you must not be too credulous. I'll bring my marriage certificate to-morrow, and we'll proceed in a more business-like fashion. Good-bye—good evening, young woman."

"Good evening, Sir," said Ann, evidently inclined to be more civil to him. When he had gone Ann Packet insisted upon putting Mattie to bed at once; she was inclined to keep her place, and talk of the extraordinary incidents of that day.

"Talk of 'em to-morrow," said Ann; "you've *gallied* your brains enough for fifty fathers."

"I feel so much happier, Ann, with some one whom I shall have a right to love."

"Well, you've a right to love who you like, o' course."

"And I shan't love my faithful, gentle nurse the worse for it."

"God bless you!—what a gal you are!"

"Life seems beginning with me for the first time—opening new scenes, new faces, new affections. Yes, Ann, I am happy to-night."

"Then I'm glad he's come—I think he's turned up for the best; although," she muttered to herself, "I shouldn't be very proud of another father like him for myself. He's *such a rum un!*"

Meanwhile Harriet Wesden—what had followed the coming of this "rum un" to her? Was her happiness fading away, as Mattie Gray's advanced? Let us see.

CHAPTER IV.

"ONLY PITY."

A COLD frosty air in the streets that night—a chilling welcome to Harriet Wesden as she emerged from the hot room into Tenchester Street. Sidney was waiting for her, staid, silent, and statuesque; he offered her his arm, which she took, and together they proceeded along the narrow street into the Southwark Bridge Road—thence past the old house in Great Suffolk Street towards the Borough.

Harriet Wesden felt that she would have given worlds, had she possessed them, to have broken the silence, and ventured on some topic which might have tested the truth or the folly of her fears; but all thoughts seemed to have deserted her.

These sudden vacuums are difficult things to account for—most of us suffer from them, more or less, at some period or other of our lives. Who cannot remember the sudden hiatus with the friend—male or female—whom we intended particularly to impress with the force of our eloquence; or the collapse in the grand speech with which we wished to return thanks for the handsome manner in which our health had been drunk at that dinner party, or the vote of confidence placed in us at that extraordinary general meeting?

Harriet Wesden was dumb; there was not one thought at which she could clutch, even the coldness of that night did not suggest itself till it was too late to speak, and the idea began to impress her that it would be more unnatural to say a few commonplace words than to keep silence.

She guessed that Sidney knew her secret, or the greater part of her secret, the instant that she had emerged into the street; and to attempt a commonplace discourse with a great sorrow overshadowing him would, after all, have been a mockery, unworthy of herself and him.

But if he would only speak!—not proceed onwards so firmly, steadily, saying never a word to relieve the embarrassment of her position. Sidney Hinchford maintained a rigid silence for almost a similar reason to Harriet's; he was at loss how to begin, and break the spell which had enchained him since his engagement. He was walking in darkness, and there was no light ahead of him. All was vanity and vexation of spirit.

At last the silence was broken. They had left behind them the long rows of lighted shops, and come to private houses, and long

dreary front gardens, with interminable rows of iron railings; there were a few late office-clerks—a shadowy woman or two—hastening homewards; the roar of London was growing fainter in the distance.

"Harriet," he began, in a deep voice, wherein all excitement was pent up and constrained, "I have heard a strange story to-night from that man claiming to be Mattie's father—is it true?"

"Yes."

She did not ask what he had heard, or attempt any defence; the sound of his voice, deep and resonant after the long silence, had set her heart beating, and rendered her answer a matter of difficulty.

"It is a strange story, and I have been hoping that it might have been explained away by some means not only unnatural—I can almost believe that it is all a dream, and no cruel waking is to follow it. Harriet, may I ask if your father is aware of this?"

"He is not yet."

"You were travelling alone with a gentleman—I will call him a gentleman for the sake of argument—in the middle of the night by the Dover mail train; at Ashford you leave the carriage abruptly, and demand protection from him—speak of a trap into which he had led you, and seek counsel of that man we met at Mattie's house to-night?"

"But——"

"But do not misunderstand me, Harriet—I can read the story for myself; I can see that you were deceived in this man, and had no consciousness of the snare prepared for you, until the hour was too late. I can believe that your sense of right was outraged, and the *gentleman* merited all the scorn which he received—but who was this man to whom you could trust yourself at that hour, and by what right were you, under any circumstances, his companion?"

"He was a man I met at Mrs. Eveleighs'—he offered to escort me to the railway station."

"A stranger?"

"No—I had met him at Brighton, before then, when I was a school-girl. He—he paid me attentions there which flattered my girlish vanity; and—and then I met him again at Mrs. Eveleighs'."

"What is his name?"

"Darcy."

"You have not seen him since?"

"No—I hope that he and I will never meet again."

"Harriet, you loved this man?"

"No," was the fearless answer; "I cannot believe that now. I might have fancied so at the time—for oh! I was bewildered by many thoughts, and my heart was troubled, Sid—but I never loved him, on my honour!"

"It is easy to think that now," said Sidney, in reply; "the idol has fallen from the pedestal, never to be replaced again—a ruin, in which no interest remains. But you loved him, or believed you

loved him at that time—it is a nice distinction—and there was no thought of me and my hopes."

"Sidney, I wrote—I—"

"Harriet, there is no need for us to say one word in anger about this," he interrupted; "I will ask no further explanation—I do not wish it. I can see now where I have been wrong, and whither my folly was leading me—and there's an end of it," he added.

"And end of—what?"

"Of the one hope that I have had. I see, now, how much better it is for you and me, and what a foolish couple we have been."

There was a long silence; they had walked on some distance before Harriet said, suddenly and sharply—

"What do you mean—what am I to understand?"

"That our engagement is at an end, and that it is better for us both to forget the romantic nonsense which we talked of lately. I will not ask you to forget me; I will not try for a single moment to forget *you*. I will prefer, if you will allow me, Harriet, to remain your friend—something of the old boy-friend I was to you, before the dream came."

"Unjust—unkind!" she murmured.

"No, you will not think that presently," he answered; "you will judge me more fairly, and see for yourself how it could not have ended otherwise for either of us. You have been more than kind to me—you have offered me the sacrifice of your best wishes, even your brightest prospects, out of pity, and I cannot have it."

"Pity!" she repeated.

Harriet was unnerved at his earnestness, at the deep sorrow which betrayed itself in every word, and which he thought that he disguised so well; but her pride was wounded also at his resignation of her, and she could see that there was no defence to urge which, by the laws of probability, had power to affect him. Between her and him that cruel past, which she had hidden from him; that proof of love or fancy for another, when he was building on her love for him; that evidence against her, which for ever robbed him of his confidence and trust. No, there was no defence, and the scornful echo of his last words were more like defiance than regret.

"Yes, pity!" he reiterated—"only pity! Harriet," he said, for an instant pressing her hand upon his arm with the old affection, "it was kind and noble of you, but it was not love. It was a sacrifice. I was a poor man; there was a great affliction in store for me, and you felt that you alone could lighten it in the present—and in the future, when it faced me and shut me in with it. You saw that you were my one hope, and you took pity on me. It was a mistake—I see the gigantic error that it was now!"

"You will see the truth—you will judge me fairer yet, Sidney."

"This past engagement between us, Harriet, has been a trouble to me lately," he continued; "my selfishness has scared me before

this, and I have felt that I had no right to bind you to me for a term of years, ending in calamity at the last. I was wrong—I retract—I am very sorry for the error—I am glad of this excuse to rectify it."

"You say that!" cried Harriet; "you are glad to break with me—to believe that I did not love you, Sidney?"

"Yes, I am glad. I can see that it was all for the best; and though I could have wished that there had been a different reason for the parting, still it takes a weight from my conscience—it is a relief!"

It was a struggle to say so, but he said it without bitterness, and in good faith. By some ingenious method of word-twisting, which Harriet could not follow, he had stopped all effort to explain more fully, and turned the blame of the engagement on himself. There was no answering; she saw that his heart was wrung with the agony of the dissolution, but she read upon that pale, stern face, to which she glanced but once, an inflexible resolve, that nothing could alter. He upbraided her not; he uttered not one sarcasm upon the folly of her past passion for Mr. Darcy, or the mistakes to which it had led; he expressed a wish to be her friend still, but he gave her up, and with all her love for him—and she knew how truly it was love then—she could not ask him to reconsider his verdict and spare her a parting as bitter for her as him. She read in that hasty glance at his face, *incredulity* of her affection for him; and no protestation on her part could have altered that. Yes, it was ended between them—perhaps for the best, God knew; she could not think of it then—she was ashamed, miserable, utterly cast down!

"Let me go home," she murmured; "what a long way it is to home."

"I will say no more, Harriet—I have been unkind to say so much," he said, in answer to that cry, in which he might have read the truth, had not his heart been for ever closed to it from that night.

So, in the same silent way as they had begun that inauspicious walk, the two concluded it, reaching the little house of Mr. Wesden shortly afterwards. Colder and more grim the night there, beyond the lighted London streets; in melancholy suburban districts like to this there seemed to lurk a greater desolation.

"Good night," he said; "don't think that we part in anger, or that I am hurt in any way at what has happened—or that I am less your friend than ever, Harriet."

"Good night," was all her answer.

He lingered still, as though he had more to say, or was endeavouring to think of something more to render the disruption less abrupt and harsh; but he relinquished the attempt, and left her, walking away rapidly as though at the last—the very last—he feared to trust himself

He did not go straight home, but walked for a while up and down the street wherein his home was, at the same rapid pace, with his breath held somewhat, and his hands clenched.

He had acted for the best—it *was* for the best, he thought!—but the result was not satisfactory, and the future beyond was the grey density at which he had recoiled, when crossing the Channel on the day he came to man's estate.

If he had died on that day, or the ship had gone down with him, how much better he thought then; better for her, for him—even for his father, perhaps, he could not tell at that time!

He went indoors at last, feigned for a while the old demeanour, and failed at a task beyond his strength for once. He gave it up, and, looking vacantly at his amazed father, said—

"I am not well to-night. I think I'll go to my room."

"Not well!—you not well, Sid?" exclaimed the father, as though the assertion were the most improbable to make in the world.

"Not very well—a head-ache."

"Ah! too much book-work. Be careful, Sid, don't overtask yourself."

"I shall be well enough to-morrow. Good night."

He left the room abruptly, and turned the key in his own apartment a few minutes afterwards. In his own room, he hunted for a few letters which she had written to him during their brief engagement, and proceeded to burn them in the empty fire-grate.

"So much the best," he muttered, "so much the best!" as though they were charmed words, that kept him strong.

He missed something else, and was uneasy about it. He went to the looking-glass drawer, and turned out the old contents upon the toilet-table—staring at a letter soiled, crumpled, and torn, but still *sealed*, which rewarded his search, and lay at the bottom.

"What's this?" he muttered.

He drew a chair nearer the drawers on which the light was placed, examined the post-mark, the superscription, the seal, then opened the letter, dated on the day he went away on special service.

A long, confused epistle, written with difficulty and under much agitation, but telling one truth, at which he had guessed—which he had spoken of that night.

"I knew it before!" he cried; but the news daunted him, and unmanned him notwithstanding.

It was the climax, and he gave way utterly.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNAVAILING EFFORT.

The dry, matter-of-fact world, with its face to business and its back to romance, is still interested in love-matters, and passingly agitated by the sudden disruption of any love-engagement. It shows an interest in the latest news, and turns from its account-books for a while to know how it came about that Damon and Phyllis could not agree upon "proprieties," and thought that it was better to part for good and aye, than to settle down for good as man and wife. Having learned the news, remarked upon the pity that it was, or the best thing that could happen for *her* or for *him*, the world goes upon its course again, and the story is as old as the hills before the leading characters have got over their first heart-pangs.

It was not a large world that was interested in the disruption of Sidney Hinchford's love engagement; two old men at Camberwell, and a needlewoman, might almost constitute it in this instance. We say almost, for a reason that will appear presently; a cautious writer should always speak with a reserve.

The two old men were interested in the news, but not profoundly affected; such is the selfishness of humanity, when matters do not seriously affect its own comfort.

Harriet Wesden told the news on the following day to her father, and he, after a stare over her head in the old fashion, thought, perhaps, that it was all for the best. Harriet told him the whole story of the past that had led to the parting, and he took stock of the principal features, and thought it was an odd affair, and that he might have been told of this Mr. Darcy a little earlier. After a while he fancied that it was more comfortable to know that Harriet was to be always with him, to attend to his small ailments, and study his eccentricities. Of late he had harassed himself somewhat with the idea that there would be an early marriage, and that he should be left entirely alone in the world; with that house and new furniture, that wash-house where the chimney always smoked, and that back-garden where groundsel grew vigorously in the garden paths. The news of the quarrel came with something like a relief to him. Harriet always at home; no one calling to distract attention away from him—well, it *was* for the best, though in his unselfish moments, and he had many of them, Harriet alone in the world after he was gone, was a picture that affected him.

There was something else to trouble him now; Harriet's story had cleared up the mystery of Mattie's actions, that last mystery which had led to an act of injustice on his part. That he had been unjust, and cast Mattie back to the streets, troubled him far more than the broken love-pledge between Harriet and Sidney; for the first time in his life he had done a wrong, a palpable and cruel one, which might have submerged a soul, and he was sorry, very sorry, for all that had led to it. It did not matter that Mattie had been rescued from utter loneliness by the appearance of her father upon the scene; his hasty judgment had only brought about the wrong, and he had tried to walk uprightly all his life, and do his best according to his powers.

Harriet, his daughter, kept her troubles to herself; she had met with the first shock that falls to the share of many a young life, and she had not made up her mind as to the best method of bearing up against it. Two years ago, this would not have been a great trouble to her; but two years had wondrously sobered her, and her eyes had only been opened to the true estimate of Sidney's character at the time when he spoke of the necessity of ending all engagement between them. He had not blamed her, or she might have defended herself; he had spoken of his own consciousness of having done wrong to bind her by a promise made in an impulsive moment, he had intimated that it was a relief to him to give her up, and in the face of the cold, unpitying world, she was powerless to act. Still she was hopeful amidst it all; it was no serious quarrel; he had spoken of his wish to remain her friend, and by one of the many chances of life, it would not be difficult for him to discover that it *was* love which drew her to him, and not the pity which is akin to it. It might all be explained when the right moment came round; but as the days passed, and no Sidney appeared, her heart sank more, and she read the future in store for her through a medium less highly coloured by her fancy.

A week after the explanation between Sidney and her, she went in search of Mattie. Always in trouble thinking of Mattie—seeking from her that consolation which her own thoughts denied her. Mattie was still in Tenchester Street, although Ann Packet had gone back to the Hinchford service. Mattie was strong enough to shift for herself again—to set about packing her scanty wardrobe for removal to her father's home; she was alone and busy with her preparations for departure, when Harriet Wesden came into the room.

After the first salutations had been exchanged—and flying remarks upon Mattie's better health and brighter looks had been made—our heroine looked steadily at Harriet, and asked what was the matter.

"Am I so altered that you should think anything had happened, Mattie?"

"There is not the look I like to see *there*," said Mattie, pointing to Harriet Wesden's face.

"It's not a happy look, is it?" she asked, with a little sigh.

"Not very."

"Sit down here beside me, and let me tell you why the happy looks have gone for ever."

"For ever! Oh! I'll not believe that."

"You'll never guess what I am going to tell you?"

"Sidney and you have quarrelled."

"Yes—no—not exactly quarrelled—what a girl you are to guess things! Sidney and I, by mutual consent, have cancelled our engagement."

"I am sorry," said Mattie, after a moment's silence; "sorry, not that the engagement has been broken for a while, for it will be renewed again—"

"Never!—never!"

"But that any difference should have arisen between you two. As for not making it up again," said Mattie, cheerfully, "oh! we can't believe that, we two who understand Sidney Hinchford so well."

"There will never be an engagement between him and me again," said Harriet; "over for once and all, Mattie."

"I say there will be," said Mattie, in an equally decisive manner. "Have I lived so long to see it all ended thus? I say it shall be!" cried Mattie, in an excited manner, that surprised even Harriet, who knew Mattie's character so well; "and we shall see, in good time, which is the true prophetess."

"Mattie, you don't know Sidney, after all."

"Tell me the story—I am very anxious."

And with a woman's keen interest in love matters—her own, or anybody else's, as the case might be—Mattie clasped her hands together, and bent forward, all eagerness for Harriet's narrative.

"It's all through your father—that father of yours, who comes upon the scene, and brings misery with him at once!" said Harriet, a little petulantly.

"Hush, Harriet!—remember that he *is* my father, now!" said Mattie, who had found one more to defend in life and to live for, "and I am learning to love him, and to understand him better every day."

"Yes—yes—you will forgive me—I am always offending some one with my hasty words. This is how the quarrel came about."

Harriet launched into her story at once; in a torrent of hurried explanations the details were poured forth, and Mattie, in a short while, knew as much as Harriet Wesden, which was not all, however, as we, who are behind the scenes of this little drama, are aware.

"Perhaps it serves *us* right," said Mattie, pluralising the case

after her old fashion; "we kept something back, and Sidney is straightforward in everything, and hates deceit, even innocent deceit like ours, practised for your good name's sake. Did you tell him that?"

"I don't know what I told him," answered Harriet, sadly. "I said nothing—I was found guilty, and there was no answer left me."

"We shall live this down, I think," said Mattie, confidently. "After all, there's nothing very serious about it—if he don't suspect us of behaving wrongly on that night."

"Sidney suspect that of me! Oh! no, no—not so bad as that!"

"Then it will all come right in time," cried Mattie. "He has loved us all his life, and will not fling himself from us in his pride and anger, as—as other men would do, more selfish and unjust than he. I see the future brightening—we will wait patiently, and not be cast down by this slight trouble."

"Slight trouble!" exclaimed Harriet. "Oh! Mattie, if you only understood what love was like, you would guess my—my sense of desolation."

Harriet flung herself on the bosom of the old faithful friend, whose face, over her shoulder, became suddenly, and for an instant only, very white and lined.

"I will try and guess," she said, in a low voice. "It must be desolate; I—I may know better some day!"

Then Mattie set herself the task of comforting this child—a child still, she thought, in her impulsiveness, and in that weakness which gave way like a child at the first trouble, and sought help and comfort from others, rather than from her own heart. And Mattie, who had the gift—that rare rich gift above all price—of comforting those who are afflicted, succeeded in putting the facts of the case in their best and less distorted light, and was rewarded before the interview was over—and when Harriet remembered it—by the new fact of how one revelation had brought about another, and cleared up the mystery of Mattie's absence from home to the man who had suspected her.

"I broke the promise—there was nothing to keep back, when I had my own story to relate."

"He knows all this," said Mattie, "and he——"

"He is very sorry for all that harshness which drove you from us—I am sure of it."

"Why, it is brightening all round," said Mattie; "we shall have no secret in the midst of us, and all will be well now!"

Both had forgotten the letter, wherein absence of all true affection was asserted; Harriet believed it destroyed, and Mattie did not think to remind her of the danger—in her heart believed it even far removed from her.

They parted hopefully; Mattie made the best of the position, and

was really trustful in a good result. Sidney Hinchford loved Harriet, and she could not understand a man loving on, and yet holding aloof from the idol he would fain worship still.

Sidney Hinchford, a few days afterwards, came to make his last inquiries concerning Mattie's health—had he waited another day he would have found empty rooms and a desolate hearth—and Mattie seized that opportunity to say a word. The grass never grew under the feet of Mattie Gray, and the dark look—new to his face in its intensity of sternness—did not deter her.

"I am sorry to hear the last news, Mr. Hinchford."

"It was to be expected," he replied shortly. He would have hastened away from a subject that distressed him, but Mattie was not deterred by his harsh voice.

"Not to be expected, you mean, Mr. Sidney," she said; "for she and you, who have been together all your lives, should——"

"Pardon me, Mattie," he interrupted, decisively; "I cannot bear a third person's interference in this matter. It lies between her and me, and both she and I have thought it better to part, without reproach or ill-will. She has made up her mind——"

"But——"

"And had she not," he said, catching at Mattie's wrist and holding it firmly with his hand, as though to stay her defence by that means, "I have made up mine, and there is nothing on earth or in Heaven to alter it, I swear!"

"Oh! Sir," cried Mattie, dismayed at this assertion, "you will think of this again—of her you have known from a little child, and should be able to trust. There's not a truer, kinder heart, in all the world!"

"She is true and kind—she would even have sacrificed her happiness for my sake—but she never loved me. I have her written evidence to that."

"The letter!—oh! the letter!"

"You knew it?—*you* helped to deceive me, too?"

"Not deceit—all was done for your own good, Mr. Sidney—she did not know her own mind when that letter was written; she——"

"She will never know it—she is a weak woman—God help her! She was never fit for me!"

"Yes," was the quick denial.

"No, I say. A thousand times no!"

He stamped his foot upon the floor and then turned away, sterner and darker in his looks than ever. Mattie's heart sank then—for she read in his face a resolve that love could not soften, or time ameliorate. She lost hope herself from that day.

"I must make up for him as well as I can," said Mattie, after he had gone; "she must not break down because he turns away. She is young and will get over it—let me see, now how shall I teach my darling to forget all this?"

CHAPTER VI.

MR. GRAY FURTHER DEVELOPED.

THAT is a grand trait of character in man, woman, or child—unselfishness. It is a trait that scarcely exists, perhaps, in its pure state; for we are selfish mortals, struggling to cut one another's throats all our lives, and coveting our neighbour's goods with a rare intensity. It is a selfish globe on which we are spinning, and it is natural to think deeply—think altogether, perhaps—of *our* loves, *our* successes, *our* chances of fame, fortune, happiness, rather than of other people's. For the reason that it has been our lot to drop upon an exception to this rule—as near an exception as this rule *sans* exception will allow—do we hold Mattie a first place in our affections, and think her story—approaching its turbulent stage—worth the telling.

Springing from a low estate, and saved as by a miracle—this flower put forth strange buds and blossoms after its transplanting. It outlived the past, and turned quickly to the light, as though light had been its craving from the first, and only a better chance, and a purer moral atmosphere, were needed to wholly change it. Mattie passed from evil to good swiftly, grateful to the hands that had been outstretched to save her; the untaught childhood became swiftly the days of grateful girlhood—and from girlhood to the gentle, honest womanhood, that thought of others' happiness, and strove hard for happiness in those she loved was but another step, easily made and never repented of.

She did all for the best, and strove hard to make the best of everything—*for others*. We know no better heroine than this, and I am very doubtful if we care for one better educated or of higher origin. And yet, Heaven be thanked, not a model heroine, who was always in the right!

Mattie removed to her father's apartments in Union Road, Brunswick Street, New Kent Road. Brunswick Street is an artery that lets the wild blood of Great Dover Street into the New Kent Road—a quiet street by day, but subject to scared strangers at night in search of the medical students who locate here in legions. Union Road is on the right of Brunswick Street, and a near cut, if you are fortunate enough not to lose yourself, to Horsemonger Lane Gaol, though what you may want *there* is more your business than ours. Mr. Gray rented the two top rooms of a small house in

Union Road, the sitting room provided with a sofa bedstead, which was henceforth to be of service to Mattie, when the day's duties were over, and Mr. Gray had finished his praying.

Here settled down the new-found father and child, and began "home" once more. Here Mattie learned by degrees to understand her father, to appreciate the many good qualities which he possessed, and to "make allowance"—as she always made allowance—for the few bad ones, which he possessed also, minister of the gospel as he termed himself.

They agreed very well together; there was little to disturb the even tenor of their way; and it fortunately happened that Mr. Gray, who was fond of argument, was blessed with a daughter who always shunned it, when the topics did not directly affect her. Mr. Gray, on the whole, was a little disappointed in his daughter—agreeably disappointed, we might have said, had not the discomfiture been so apparent on his features for a while. He was a man fond of making converts; it had been his profession, and he had met with success therein. He had promised himself the pleasure of saving his daughter from the dangers and temptations of the world, and he had found one who was out of danger and as above temptation as he was. From Mrs. Watts' account, subsequently from Mr. Wesden's, he had been led to expect a very different daughter to this; a girl who had run the streets for eleven years—who had been a friendless stray upon those streets, a thief and beggar at intervals when honesty did not *pay*—who had afterwards left her master's house under suspicion of a grave character—was likely to be a wilful, vicious specimen of womanhood, and worthy of his earnest efforts to subdue. Though he would not have owned it to himself, yet the belief in Mattie being unregenerate and defiant had added an intensity to his search for her; since his own better life, he had been ever in search of a thoroughly fine specimen of impenitence to practise upon, and now even his own daughter had disappointed him!

He discovered that she was a regular attendant at chapel—not even at church, to whose forms he had the true dissenter's objection—that she read her Bible regularly, and took comfort from its pages—that she was gentle, charitable, kind, unselfish, everything that he would have liked to make her by his intense love and application, and which he had found ready-made to hand.

He returned thanks for all this in his usual manner, but there was an occasional blankness of expression on his countenance; he was truly glad to have discovered his daughter, but he found that she was never to owe him an immense debt of gratitude for her reformation, and he had built upon that whenever they were thrown together, father and child, at last. Beyond his home he must look once more for the obdurate specimen that

he could attack, follow up, analyse and dissect, with the gusto of a surgeon over "as fine a case as ever he saw in his life!"

But that home—in a very little time what a different place it was to him! He found in Mattie all that he could have made of her, and after a while he was more than content. He was a man who made but little show of earthly affection, and possibly deceived Mattie, who took his love for duty more often than he wished, though it was his pride to abjure all evidence of earthly affection, and to consider himself, as he termed it, above it. He was a man who deceived himself by this—people have that peculiar trait of character now and then, and place credence in their own impossibilities.

Mr. Gray was a lithographer by trade—a man who would have earned more money had not his preaching interfered with his work, and had he not been rather too particular for a business man upon what work he engaged himself. A crotchety, irritable being, who brought his religion into his business, and, therefore, occasionally muddled both. On one occasion he had been horrified by the receipt of an order to lithograph several scenes from the last new pantomime, to be exhibited on broadsheets outside the theatre-doors, and in tobacconists' shops; and having declined to be an agent in such a "Worke of the Beast," had been dismissed from the staff of the firm which he had faithfully served for many years. He had lived hard after that, known what it was to be penniless and fireless, and almost bootless, but those unpleasant sensations had their comforts for him—they were evidences of his sacrifice for his character's sake, and he had fought on doggedly till other employment came, which brought his head above water. He was a man who never gave way in his opinions, or sacrificed them for his personal convenience —a disagreeable man more often than not, but a man respected amongst his chapel-circle, and who, when once understood—that was not often, however—was generally liked. A man who dealt in hard truths, and had not invariably the gentlest method of distributing them; but a man who loved to see justice done to all oppressed, and did his best after his own way.

His first attempt to do justice, after Mattie's acquaintance with him, was in Mattie's favour. He understood all the reasons for Mattie's departure from Great Suffolk Street, and he saw where Mr. Wesden had been deceived, and in what manner he had been led by degrees to form a false estimate of Mattie's conduct.

He was a fidgety man, we have implied—more than that, he was an excitable and restless man.

"I must see that Mr. Wesden again—we must both see him Mattie," he said one evening.

"Oh! I can never face him," said Mattie, in an alarmed manner, after all that he has thought of me. I could not bear to ask him to

confess that he was in the wrong, if he will not confess it of his own free will."

"But he shall, my dear!"

"I can't explain the robberies—can't prove that I was innocent of all implication in them. I was a thief once, and he will never forget that."

"Won't he?" said Mr. Gray, decisively. "We'll see about that. I'll rouse him, my dear, depend upon it. The first opportunity I have, I'll call upon that man, and—rouse him."

"I hope not."

Mattie was at work at the fireside; she had taken to dress-making again, amongst a new connection of chapel-goers introduced by her father, and Mr. Gray was busy at his lithography. He was working hard into the night, doing extra work, in order that he might have all the next week free for a preaching expedition amongst the colliers, and he did not turn from his work to express his opinion; on the contrary, bent more earnestly over it.

"It's no good hoping, my dear, I have made up my mind; he hasn't acted fairly by you—he hasn't made atonement—I must talk to him presently."

Mattie was glad of the postponement, and hopeful that her father, in his multiplicity of engagements, would forget his determination—a strange hope, for Mr. Gray never forgot anything.

"What kind of man is this Mr. Wesden, Mattie?" he asked. "I have only seen him once, for a few minutes. Hard, isn't he?"

"Sometimes. He has altered very much lately."

"A worldly man—fond of money—grasping, in fact. Such a man is hard to impress. I'll have a try at him, though."

"He's a very good man, father," Mattie said; "you must remember that he saved me from the streets, and that for years and years he was very good and kind to me."

"Yes, yes—I shall pay him back some day—but he must be worldly, I should think, and in return for all his goodness I'll make a good man of him—see if I don't! I suppose you used to open on Sundays in Great Suffolk Street?"

"Never."

"Hum—that's well. Not so bad as I thought. Did he go to chapel of a Sunday, now?"

"To church—St. George's."

"Hum—that's not so bad. Not much credit in making a better man of *him*," he muttered; "but I'll rouse him!"

The next day he neglected his work on purpose to attempt the experiment. He was successful enough, for there was a rough eloquence inherent in him, and he had a fair cause to plead; and the result was, that the roused Mr. Wesden made his appearance arm in arm with Mr. Gray at Mattie's home.

"I've got him!" said Mr. Gray, triumphantly; "here's Mr

Wesden, Mattie. He has come to say how very sorry he was for all that parted you and him—haven't you, Sir?"

"Very sorry," said Mr. Wesden, looking at Mattie, askance; "I've been thinking of it a long while—yes, Mattie, very sorry!"

He held out both hands to her, and Mattie ran to him, clasped them in her own, shook them heartily, and then burst out crying on his shoulder.

"Oh! my first father!—I didn't think that you would believe wrong of me all your life!"

"No—and it was very wrong—Mattie. And all will be right now—you and your father must come and see us very often."

"Yes."

She turned to her father eagerly, but Mr. Gray was at his lithography, bending closely over his work, and apparently taking no heed of this reconciliation. He had done his share of duty, and so his interest had vanished.

"Father—you hear?"

"I don't care about much company—when we've nothing better to do than idle our time away, perhaps," was the far from suave reply to this.

"My daughter and yours are old friends, Mr. Gray," said Mr. Wesden, almost entreatingly.

"Mattie won't care about much company herself—and I very much doubt if that young person you allude to is exactly fitted for my daughter, whose character I am anxious to model after my own ideas of what is truly womanly."

Mattie looked up at this; her father was strange in his manner that night, and he perplexed her.

"Am I not truly womanly now, Sir?" she asked, with a merry little laugh. She was in high spirits that night.

Mr. Gray softened.

"You are a very good girl, Mattie—a very good girl indeed; there are only a few little alterations necessary," he added, as though he was speaking of some marble statue whose corners he might round off with a chisel at his leisure.

"And you, Sir," said Mattie, turning to Mr. Wesden again, "don't think *any* harm of me now? The robberies—the talk with Mr. Hinchford—" she added, with a faint blush.

"What was that?" asked Mr. Gray, with renewed alacrity.

"Foolishness—all foolishness on my part," said Wesden; "how could I have acted so? And yet, when it came to being out all night, the fancies turned to truths, it seemed. Ah! no matter now."

"No matter now. Oh! I am very happy. Will you sit down here for a while, and tell me about Harriet and yourself—and *she* who was always so kind to me?"

"And thought well of you to the last. We wrangled once or

twice about that—the only thing we ever had to quarrel about, Mattie, in all our lives together."

"Sit down and tell me about her—my true mother! You will excuse my father—he is very busy."

"Certainly."

And after his old dreamy stare at Mr. Gray, who appeared to have suddenly and entirely lost all interest in Mr. Wesden, he sat down by the fireside and talked of old times—the dear old times that Mattie loved to hear about. Mattie was happy that night; her heart was lighter; her character had been redeemed to him who had mistrusted her; he was sitting again by her side—all her love for him had come back as it were, and all his cruel thoughts of her had vanished away for ever.

Mr. Wesden talked more than he used, when one particular subject was dilated on; and to have Mattie full of interest in that better half of him that had gone from life on earth to life eternal, gave brightness to his eyes, vigour to his narrative, and rendered him oblivious to time, till a deep voice behind him broke in upon the dialogue.

"It's getting late."

"Ah! it must be," said Mr. Wesden, rising. "And you'll come now, Mattie? You have forgiven me?"

"With all my heart—what there was to forgive!"

"And you'll let her come, Mr. Gray, now I have done her that justice?"

"When there's time."

Mr. Wesden departed; Mattie saw him down stairs to the passage door, and stood watching his figure, not so active as of yore, proceeding down the dimly lighted street. When she returned to the sitting-room, she found that her father had left his work, and was sitting with his feet on the fender, rubbing the palms of his hands slowly together. He did not look round when she came in; when she had taken her seat near him he did not look up at her. There was a change in him, which Mattie remarked, and after a little while inquired the reason for.

"Mattie," he said suddenly, "I didn't know that you were so fond of Mr. Wesden, or I'd have never brought him here."

"Yes, I am fond of him—I am fond of all those who have been kind to me—who belong unto the past, of which he and I have been speaking to-night."

"You like him better than me?"

Mattie was too astonished to reply at once to this. She saw the reason for his sudden reserve to Mr. Wesden in a new light; she detected a new feature in him, that had heretofore been hidden. Years ago—like a far-away murmur—she could fancy that her mother spoke again of her husband's jealousy as one reason why home had been unhappy, and she had fled from it. Mr. Gray became

excited. His eyes lit up, his face flushed a little, and his hands puckered up bits of cloth at his knees in a nervous, irritable way.

"I shouldn't like that man to be put ever before me in everything —to be liked better than myself—he has got a daughter of his own to love, and must not rob me of you. I can't have it—I won't have it! My life has been a very desolate one till now, and it is your duty to make amends for it, and be faithful to me in the latter days."

"You may trust me, father."

She laid her hand on his, and he turned and looked into her dark eyes, where truth and honesty where shining. He brightened up at once.

"I think I may—you'll not forget me—you'll be like a daughter to me. Yes, I *can* trust you, Mattie!"

This fugitive cloud was wafted away on the instant; Mattie almost forgot the occurrence, and all was well again.

CHAPTER VII.

A DINNER PARTY.

Meanwhile Sidney Hinchford had mapped his course out for the future; he had been ever fond of planning out his paths in life, as though no greater planner than he were near to thwart him. That they were turned from their course or broken short, at times, taught no lesson; he gave up his progress upon them, but he sketched at once the new course for his adoption, and began afresh his journey.

He had parted with Harriet Wesden for ever; so be it—it belonged to the irreparable, and he must look it sternly in the face and live it down as best he might. It had been all a fallacy, and he the slave of a delusion—if, in the waking, he had suffered much, was in his heart still suffering, let him keep an unmoved front before the world, that should never guess at the keenness and bitterness of this disappointment. He had his duties to pursue; he had his father to deceive by his demeanour—he must not let the shadow of his distress darken the little light remaining for that old man, whom he

loved so well, and who looked upon him as the only one left to love, or was worth living for.

He told his father that the engagement was at an end; that Harriet and he had both, by mutual consent, released each other from the contract, and considered it better to be friends—simply friends, who could esteem each other, and wish each other well in life. There had been no quarrelling, he was anxious to impress on Mr. Hinchford; he had himself suggested the separation, feeling, in the first place, that Harriet Wesden was scarcely suited to be his wife; and in the second, that he had been selfish and unjust to bind her to an engagement extending over a period of years, with all uncertainty beyond.

The old gentleman scarcely comprehended the details; he understood the result, and as it did not appear to seriously affect his son, he could imagine that Sid had acted honourably, and for the very best. *He* did not want Sid to marry, and perhaps live apart from him; he knew that much of his own happiness would vanish away at the altar, where Sid would take some one for better, for worse, and he could not regret in his heart anything that retained his boy at his side. In that heart he had often thought that Harriet Wesden was scarcely fit for his son's wife, scarcely deserving of that dear boy —there was time enough for Sid to marry a dozen years hence—he had married late in life himself, and why should not his son follow his example?

Sidney Hinchford heard a little of this reasoning in his turn, but whether he admired his father's remarks or not, did not appear from the unmoved aspect of his countenance. He was always anxious to turn the conversation into other channels; partial in those long evenings to backgammon with his father—a game which absorbed Mr. Hinchford's attention, and rendered him less loquacious. Still Sidney was a fair companion, and disguised the evidence of his disappointment well; he had set himself the task of making the latter days of that old gentleman free from care if possible, and he played his part well, and would have deceived keener eyes than his father's. That father was becoming weaker in body and mind, Sid could see; he was more feeble than his elder brother now—success in life had tested his nervous system more—possibly worn him out before his time. Like his son, he had had ever a habit of keeping his chief troubles to himself, and preserving a fair front to society. He had had a nervous wife to study, afterwards a son to encourage by his staunch demeanour. He had been an actor throughout the days of his tribulation, and such acting is the wear and tear of body and mind, and produces its natural fruit at a later season.

Sidney Hinchford saw the change in him, and knew that their parting must come, sooner than the father dreamed of. Mr. Hinchford had a knowledge of his own defects, but not of their extent. He

was ignorant how weak he had become, as he seldom stirred from home now; and his memory, which played him traitor, also helped him to forget its defects! He pictured Sidney and him together for many years yet—the Hinchfords were a long-lived race, and he did not dream of himself being an exception to the rule.

But Sidney noted every change, and became anxious. He noted also that the powers of mind seemed waning faster than the body, and that there were times when his father almost forgot their poor estate, and talked more like the rich man he had been once. He brought a doctor to see him once, sat him down by his father's side, in the light of an office friend, and then waited anxiously for the verdict delivered an hour afterwards, in the passage.

"Keep him from all excitement if you can—let him have his own way as much as possible—and there is not a great deal to fear."

Sidney cautioned Ann Packet, who was partial to a way of her own, and then went to office more contented in mind. Over the office books, he was sterner and graver than he used to be, and more inclined than ever to repel the advances of his cousin.

His salary had been raised by that time; he had distinguished himself as a good and faithful servant, and he took the wages that were due to him, with thanks for his promotion.

One day, his uncle sent for him into the inner chamber, to speak of matters foreign to the business of a banking house.

"Sidney, I have troubled you more than once with advice concerning my son Maurice."

"Yes."

"He is about to offer you and your father an invitation to dine with him next week."

"I know what to answer, Sir," said Sidney, somewhat stiffly. He objected to this advice-gratis principle, and thought that Mr. Geoffry Hinchford might have left him to his own judgment.

"No, you don't, and that's why I sent for you. Maurice will be thirty-one next week—it's a little family affair, almost exclusively confined to members of the family, and I hope that you will both come."

"Sir—I——"

"Bygones are bygones; we do not make a mere pretence of having forgotten the past—*we* Hinchfords," said his uncle. "Sidney, I will ask it as a favour?"

"Very well, Sir. But my father is not well, and I fear not able to bear any extra fatigue."

"I am not afraid of old Jemmy's consent," said the banker. "There, go to your desk, and don't waste valuable time in prolixity."

Late that day Maurice Hinchford addressed his cousin. Sidney was going down the bank steps homewards, when his cousin followed him, and passed his arm through his.

"Sidney—you'll find two letters of mine at home. They are for you and your father. I shall call it deuced unkind to say 'No' to their contents!"

"Suppose we say 'Yes,' then!"

"Thank you. The governor and I want you and your governor down at our place next week. No excuses. Even Mr. Geoffry Hinchford will not have them this time; that stern paterfamilias, who thinks familiarity with me will breed the usual contempt."

"For the business—not for you, Maurice!"

"He's very anxious to make a model clerk of you; and very much afraid that I shall spoil you. As if I were so dangerous a friend, relative, or acquaintance! Upon my honour, I can't make it out exactly. I've had an idea that I should be just the friend for you. Perhaps the governor is coming round to my way of thinking, at last."

Sidney repeated his past assertions that their positions did not, and could never correspond. Maurice laughed at this as usual.

"Haven't I told you fifty times that I don't care a fig for position, and that a Hinchford is always a Hinchford—*i.e.*, a gentleman? Sidney, you are an incomprehensibility; when you marry that lady to whose attractions you have confessed yourself susceptible, perhaps I shall make you out more clearly."

Sidney's countenance changed a little—he became grave, and his cousin noticed the difference.

"Anything wrong?" was the quick question here.

Sidney was annoyed that he had betrayed himself—he who prided himself upon mastering all emotion when the occasion was necessary.

"Oh! no; everything right, Maurice!" he said with a forced lightness of demeanour; "the folly of an engagement that could end in nothing, discovered in good time, and two romantic beings sobered for their good!"

"Why could it end in nothing?—I don't see."

"Oh! it's a long story," replied Sidney, "and you would not feel interested in it. I was selfish to seek to bind her to a long engagement, and we both thought so, after mature deliberation. I turn off here—Good night!"

"Good night!"

Sidney found the invitations awaiting him at home. Mr. Hinchford had opened his own letter, and spent the greater part of the afternoon in perusing and re-perusing it.

"What—what do you think of this, Sid?"

"Tell me what *you* think of it."

"Well—I think, just for once, we might as well go—show them that we know how to behave ourselves, poor as we are, Sidney."

"Very well," said Sidney, somewhat wearily; "we'll go!"

"Let me see; what have I done with that dress coat of mine?" said the father; "how long is it since I wore it, I wonder?"

Twenty-five years, or thereabouts, since Mr. Hinchford had worn a dress coat, consequently a little behind the fashion just then. Sidney Hinchford thought with a sigh of the fresh expenses incurred by the acceptance of his cousin's invitation; he who was saving money for the rainy days ahead of him. How long ahead now, he thought, were the years still to intervene and leave him in God's sunlight? He could not tell; but there was a cruel doubt, which kept him restless. Give him his sight whilst his father lived, at least, and spare the white head further care in this life! Afterwards, when he was alone, he thought, a little misanthropically, it did not matter. His own trouble he could bear, and there would be no one else —no one in all the world!—to grieve about *him*. A few expressions of commonplace condolence for his affliction, and then —for ever alone!

Sidney Hinchford and his father went down by railway to Red-Hill. The dinner party was for five P.M.—an early hour, to admit of London friends' return by the eleven o'clock train. At the station, Mr. Geoffry Hinchford's carriage waited for father and son, and whirled them away to the family mansion, whilst the less favoured, who had arrived by the same train, sought hired conveyances.

"He treats us well—just as we deserve to be treated—just as I would have treated him, Sid. He was always a good sort—old Jef!"

Sidney did not take heed of his father's change of opinion—the world had been full of changes, and here was nothing to astonish him. He was prepared for anything remarkable now, he thought—he could believe in any transformations.

Father and son reached their relative's mansion exactly as the clock in the turret roof of the stable-house was striking five—there were carriages winding their way down the avenue before them, the hired flys with their hungry occupants were bringing up the rear. Sid looked from the carriage window, and almost repented that he had brought his father to the festivities. But Mr. Hinchford was cool and self-possessed; it was a return to the old life, and he seemed brighter and better for the change.

Maurice Hinchford received them in the hall; the first face in the large ante-room was that of Uncle Geoffry. There was no doubt of the genuineness of their reception—it was an honest and a hearty welcome.

Sidney had mixed but little in society—few young men at his age had seen less of men and manners, yet few men, old or young, could have been more composed and stately. He was not anxious to look his best, or fearful of betraying his want of knowledge; he had graver thoughts at his heart, and being indifferent as to the

effect he produced, was cool and unmoved by the crowd of guests into which he had been suddenly thrust. He had accepted that invitation to oblige his cousin, not himself; and there he was, by his father's side, for Maurice's guests to think the best or worst of him—which they pleased, he cared not.

Poor Sid at this time was inclined to be misanthropical; he looked at all things through a distorting medium, and he had lost his natural lightness of heart. His lip curled at the stateliness and frigidity of his uncle's guests, and he was disposed to see a stand-offishness in some of them which did not exist, and was only the natural ante-dinner iciness that pervades a conglomeration of diners-out, unknown to each other. Still it steeled Sidney somewhat; he was the poor relation, he fancied, and some of these starchy beings scented his poverty by instinct! Maurice introduced him to his mother and sisters—people with whom we shall have little to do, and therefore need not dilate upon. The greeting was a little stiff from the maternal quarter—Sidney remembered on the instant his father's previous verdicts on the brother's wife—cordial and cousinly enough from the sisters, two pretty girls, the junior of Maurice, and three buxom ladies, the senior of their brother—two married, with Maurices of their own.

Sidney endeavoured to act his best; he had not come there to look disagreeable, though he felt so, in the first early moments of meeting; when the signal was given to pass into the dining-room, he offered his arm to his youngest cousin, at Maurice's suggestion, and thawed a little at her frankness, and at the brightness of her happy-looking face.

There might have been one little pang at the evidence of wealth and position which that dining room afforded him—for he was a Hinchford also, and his father had been a rich man in past days—but the feeling was evanescent, if it existed, and after one glance at his father, as cool and collected as himself, he devoted himself to the cousin, whom he had met for the first time in his life.

A grand dinner-party, given in grand style, as befitted a man well to do in the world. No gardeners and stablemen turned into waiters for the nonce, and still unmistakably gardeners and stablemen for all their limp white neckcloths—no hired waiters from remote quarters of the world, and looking more like undertaker's men than lackeys—no flustered maid-servants and nursery-maids, pressed into the service, and suffering from nervous trepidation—this array of footmen at the back, the staff always on hand in that palatial residence, which a lucky turn of the wheel had reared for Geoffry Hinchford.

Sidney's cousin sang the praises of her brother all dinner-time; what a good-tempered, good-hearted fellow he was, and how universally liked by all with whom he came in contact. She was anxious to know what Sidney thought of him, and whether he had been

impressed by Maurice's demeanour; and Sidney sang in a minor key to the praises of his cousin also, not forgetting in his peculiar pride to regret that difference of position which set Maurice apart from him.

Miss Hinchford did not see that, and was sure that Maurice would scoff at the idea—she was sure, also, that everyone would be glad to see Sidney at their house as often as he liked to call there. Sidney thawed more and more; a naturally good-tempered man, with a pleasant companion at his side, it was not in his power to preserve a gloomy aspect; he became conversational and agreeable; he had only one care, and that was concerning his father, to whom he glanced now and then, and whom he always found looking the high-bred gentleman, perfectly at his ease—and very different to the old man whose mental infirmities had kept him anxious lately. Mr. James Hinchford had gone back to a past in which he had been ever at home; his pliant memory had abjured all the long interim of poverty, lodgings in Great Suffolk Street, and a post at a builder's desk; he remembered nothing of them that night, and was the old Hinchford that his brother had known. To the amazement of his son, he rose after dinner to propose the toast of the evening—somewhat out of place, being a relation, and yet a stranger almost—and spoke at length, and with a fluency and volubility which Sidney had not remarked before. He assumed his right to propose the toast as the oldest friend of the family, and he did it well and gracefully enough, utterly confounding the family physician, who had been two days compiling a long and elaborate speech which "that white-headed gentleman opposite" had taken completely out of his mouth.

That white-headed gentleman sat down amidst hearty plaudits, and Maurice's health was drunk with due honours; and then Maurice—"dear old Morry!" as his sister impetuously exclaimed—responded to the toast.

A long speech in his turn, delivered with much energy and rapidity, his flushed and good-looking face turning to right and left of that long array of guests around him. Sidney's heart thrilled to hear one expression of Maurice's—an allusion to the gentleman who had proposed his health, "his dear uncle, whose presence there tended so much to the pleasurable feelings of that night."

"Well—he is a good fellow," said Sidney, heartily; "I wish I had a brother like him to stand by me in life."

His cousin looked her gratitude at him for the outburst, and no one hammered the table more lustily than Sidney at the conclusion of his cousin's speech.

There were a few more toasts before the ladies retired at the signal given by the hostess; there was a rustle of silk and muslin through the broad doorway, and then the gentlemen left to themselves, and many of them breathing freer in consequence.

There remained some twenty or twenty-five gentlemen to do

honour to the wine which shone from the array of decanters on the table; Sidney drew his chair closer to his neighbour's, and looked round him again. His father, perfectly at home—happy and equable—sparing with the wine, too, as Sidney had wished, and yet had not thought filial to hint to his sire. His father almost faced him, and Sidney, whose powerful glasses brought him within range of vision, could return the smile bestowed in his direction now and then. The old man, who had forgotten his poverty, kept in remembrance the son who had shared that poverty with him.

There was more speech-making after the ladies had retired; deeper drinking, and a wider scope of subjects. One gentleman near his father, in a lackadaisical strain, rose to propose the health of the family physician, who had been balked of his speech early in the evening; and Sidney, startled somewhat by the tone of a voice that he fancied he had heard before, peered through his glasses, and tried to make the speaker out.

He had seen that man before, or heard that strange drawl—where or in what company he was at fault—the man's features were indistinct at that distance. He edged his chair nearer—even in his intense curiosity, for which he was scarcely able to account, changed his place, and went a few seats from the foot of the table, where Maurice was now sitting in his mother's vacated place.

Then Sidney recognised the man—suddenly and swiftly the truth darted upon him—he had met that man in the Borough; he had stood between him and his offensive persecution of Harriet Wesden; he was the "prowler" of old days—the man from whom he had extorted an apology in the public streets, and from whom a generous and unwashed public would accept no apology.

The old antagonism seemed to revive on the instant; he felt the man's presence there an insult to himself; his blood warmed, and his ears tingled; he wondered what reason had brought that man there, and whose friend he could possibly be?

"What man is that?" he asked almost imperiously of Maurice, who, taken aback by the question, stared at Sidney with amazement.

"A friend of mine," he answered at last. "Do you know him?"

"N—no."

Sidney relapsed into silence and mastered his excitement. This was not a time or place to mention how he had met that man, or in what questionable pursuit; there was danger to Maurice, from so evil an acquaintance; and in his own honesty of purpose, Sid could not understand that the man had any right at that table, an honoured guest there. He knew but little of polite society; did not understand that polite society requires no reference as to the morals of its guests, and is quite satisfied if the name be good, and the status unquestionable. Polite society cannot trouble itself about the morals of its male members.

Sidney sat and watched the prowler, and, in his confusion, drank more port wine than was perhaps good for him. He fancied that his cousin Maurice had implied a rebuke for his harsh interrogative; and he was considering *that*, too, in his mind, and wishing, for the first time, that he had not presented himself at his cousin's dinner-table.

The toast was drunk and responded to by the family physician, who very ingeniously dove-tailed the remarks upon Maurice's natal day into his own expression of thanks for the honour accorded him. Sidney omitted to drink the stranger's health, and made no attempt to applaud the fine words by which it had been succeeded. He sat discomfited by the prowler's presence there—but for that man he might never have been engaged to Harriet Wesden, and, therefore, have never experienced the disappointment—the cruel reaction—which had followed the folly of that betrothal.

"Sid," called his father across the table at him, "aren't you well, lad?"

"Oh! very well," was the reply; "what is there to ail me in such pleasant company?"

"Perhaps the gentleman is sighing for lady's society; if he will move an adjournment, I'll second the motion," said the prowler, suave and bland, totally forgetful of that dark face which had glowered at him once in London streets.

"I shall propose nothing," said Sid, curtly.

Those who heard the uncivil reply looked towards the speaker somewhat curiously. When the wine's in, the wit's out—had Sidney Hinchford drowned his courtesy in his uncle's decanters? The prowler—he is a fugitive character, whose name we need not parade at this late stage to our readers—stared at our hero with the rest, but was not affected by it, or understood good breeding sufficiently well to disguise all evidence at his friend's table. He turned to Maurice with a laugh.

"Hinchford, old fellow, I leave the proposition in your hands. You who were always a lady's man."

"Not I."

"But I say you were—I say that you are. Do you think that I have forgotten all the *aventures amoureuses* of Maurice Darcy—I, his sworn brother-in-arms—his pupil?"

"Steady, Frank, steady!" cried Maurice.

But the guests were noisy, and the subject was a pleasant one to gentlemen over their wine, with the door closed on skirts and flounces. There were shouts of laughter at the prowler's charge—Maurice shook his head, blushed and laughed, but appeared rather to like the accusation than otherwise—Maurice's father, at home and at his ease, laughed with the rest. "A young dog—a young scapegrace!" he chuckled. Even Sidney's father laughed also—young men will be young men, he thought, and the prowler was pleasant

company, and made the time fly. It is this after-dinner-talk, when the ladies have retired, and the bottle is not allowed to stand still, which pleases diners-out the most. This is the "fun of the fair," where the Merry-Andrew deals forth his jokes, and the wine-bibber appreciates the double-entendre all the more for the singing in his ears, and the thick mist by which he is surrounded.

"Do you think that I have forgotten the stationer's daughter?—by George! that was a leaf from romance, and virtuous indignation in the ascendant. Tell us the story, Maurice, we are all friends here; and though the joke's against you——"

"Gentlemen, I propose that we join the ladies," said Maurice, rising, with some confusion.

The guests laughed again noisily at this—it was so palpable an attempt to retreat, that the dining-room rang again with peals of laughter—Sidney Hinchford, sterner and grimmer than ever, alone sat unmoved, until Maurice had dropped into his seat in despair, and then he rose and looked across at his father.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Certainly—Sid—quite ready!"

"Oh! the ladies have a hundred topics to dwell upon over their coffee, Sidney," said his uncle; "we must have no rebellion this side of the house."

"I am going home, Sir—you must excuse me—I cannot stay here any longer. Come, father!"

"Home!"

"I have business at home—I am pressed for time—I will *not* stay!" he almost shouted.

Sidney's father, in mild bewilderment, rose and tottered after him. This was an unpleasant wind-up to a social evening, and Sid's strange demeanour perplexed him. But the boy's will was law, and he succumbed to it; the boy always knew what was best—his son, Sid, was never at fault—never!

The guests were too amazed to comprehend the movement; some of them were inclined to consider it a joke of Sid's—an excuse to retreat to the drawing-room; the mystery was too much for their wine-benumbed faculties just then.

Sidney and his father were in the broad marble-paved hall; the footmen lingering about there noted their presence—one made a skip towards the drawing-room facing them.

"Stop!" said Sid. His memory was good, and his organ of locality better. He walked with a steady step towards a small room at the end of the hall—a withdrawing-room, where the hats and coats had been placed early in the evening. He returned in a few moments with his great-coat on, his father's coat across his arm, and two hats in his hands.

"Then—then we're really going, Sid?"

"I'm sick of this life; it is not fit for us. Why did we come?"

he asked, angrily, as he assisted his perplexed father into his great-coat.

"I—I don't know, Sid," stammered the father. "I thought that we were spending quite a pleasant evening. Has anyone said anything?"

"Let us be off!"

Maurice Hinchford came from the dining-room towards them with a quick step. There was excitement, even an evidence of concern upon his handsome face.

"Sidney," he said, holding out his hand towards him, "I understand all this. I can explain all this at a more befitting time. Don't go now—it looks bad. It isn't quite fair to us or yourself."

"You are Maurice Darcy!" said Sid, sternly.

"It was a fool's trick, of which I have heartily repented. It——"

"You were the man who deliberately sought the ruin of an innocent girl to whom I was engaged—you sought my disgrace and hers, and you ask me to your house, and insult me through your friends thus shamelessly. You make a jest——"

"On my honour, no, Sir!"

"No matter—I see to whom I have been indebted; perhaps the motive which led to past preferment—I am ashamed and mortified—I have done with you and yours for ever. I would curse the folly that led me hither to-night, were it not for the light in which it has placed my enemies!"

"You are rash, Sidney. To-morrow you will think better of me."

"When my cooler judgment steps in and shows me what I must sacrifice for my position—*my place*," he replied. "Sir, you are a Hinchford—you should know that we are a proud family by this time. I say that we have done with you—judge me at your worst, as I judge you!—if I fail to keep my word."

He passed his arm through his father's and led the bewildered old man down the steps into the night air; he had been insulted, he thought, and thus, spurning appearances, he had resented it. He could not play longer his part of guest in that house; his old straightforward habits led him at once to show his resentment and retire. So he shook the dust of the house from his feet, and turned his back upon his patrons.

CHAPTER VIII.

MATTIE'S CONFESSION.

SIDNEY HINCHFORD kept his word. He returned not to service in his uncle's bank. He gave up his chances of distinction in that quarter, rather than be indebted to a villain, as he considered his cousin to be, for his success in life. It was an exaggeration of virtuous indignation, perhaps, but it was like Sidney Hinchford. He considered his cousin as the main cause of his separation from Harriet Wesden; that man had met her after the little Brighton romance, of which faint inklings had been communicated to Sid by Harriet herself, and had played the lover too well—speciously coaxing her from that which was true, unto that which was false and dangerous, and from which her own defence had but saved her. Evidently a deep, designing man, who had sought the ruin of the woman Sidney had loved best in the world—Sid could not hold service under him now the mask had dropped.

"Father, I shall leave our rich relations to themselves," he had said, the next morning. "I am not afraid of obtaining work in other quarters. I have done with them."

"You know best, Sid," said the father, with a sigh.

"I'll tell you the story—it's no secret now. You shall tell me how you would have acted in my place."

Sid related the particulars of his love-engagement to his father—why it had been broken of, and by whose means, and Mr. Hinchford listened attentively, and exclaimed, when the narrative was ended—

"That nephew was a scamp of the first water, and we are well rid of him."

"I am not afraid of getting other employment," said Sidney, unremindful of his past attempts. "If I were, I think I would prefer starving to service in that bank."

"Both of us would," added Mr. Hinchford.

Sidney thought of his father, and went out again in the old search for a place. It was beginning life again; he was once more at the bottom of the hill, and all the past labour was to be begun afresh. No matter, he did not despair; he was young and strong yet; he had saved money; upwards of a hundred pounds were put by for the rainy day, and he could afford to wait a while; if fortune went

against him at this new outset, his was not a nature to flinch at the first obstacle. He had always fought his way.

But luck went with him, as it seemed to Sidney. That day he heard of the starting of a new bank on the limited liability principle, and he sought out the manager, stated his antecedents, offered his services, and was engaged. He came home rejoicing to his father with the news, and after all had been communicated, his father tendered him a letter that had been awaiting his arrival.

Sidney looked at the letter; in the left corner of the envelope was written "Maurice Hinchford," and Sid's first impulse was to drop it quietly in the fire, and pay no heed to its contents. But he changed his mind, broke the seal, and read, in a few hasty lines, Maurice's desire for an interview with his cousin. Maurice confessed to being the Darcy of that past evil story, and expressed a wish to enter into a little explanation of his conduct, weak and erring as it was, but not so black as Sidney might imagine. Sidney tore up the letter and penned his reply—unyielding and unforgiving. He could find no valid excuse for his cousin's conduct; he was sure there was not any, and he saw no reason why they two should ever meet again. This, the substance of Sidney Hinchford's reply, which was despatched, and then the curtain fell between these two young men, and Sidney alone in the world, more grim, more business-like, even more misanthropical than ever.

He had soon commenced work in the new bank. Before its start in the world with the usual flourish of trumpets, he had found himself taken into confidence, and his advice on matters monetary and commercial followed on more than one occasion; he was, in his heart, sanguine of success in this undertaking; he saw the road to his own honourable advancement; his employers had been pleased with the character which they had received from Messrs. Hinchford and Son, bankers, to whom Sidney had referred them, with a little reluctance; before him all might yet be bright enough.

Then came the check to his aspirations—the check which he had feared, which he had seen advancing to rob him of the one tie that had bound him to home. His father gave way more in body if not in mind, and became very feeble in his gait; he had reached the end of his journey, and was tired, dispirited, and broken down. He gave up, and took to his bed. Sidney, returning one day from office, found him in his own room, a poor, weak, trembling old man, set apart for ever from the toil and wear of daily life.

His mind seemed brighter in those latter days, to have cleared for a while before the darkness set in.

"Sidney," he said, reaching out his thin hand to his son as he entered, "you must not mind my giving up. I have been trying

hard to keep strong, for your sake, but the effort has tired me out, boy."

"Courage! I shall see you hale and hearty yet."

"No, Sid, it's a break up for ever. What a miserable, selfish old fellow I have been all my life! You will get on better in the world without me—only yourself to think of and care for then."

"Only myself!" echoed Sidney, gloomily.

The poor old gentleman would have offered more of this sort of consolation had not Sidney stopped him. It was a cruel philosophy, against which the son's heart protested. Sid was a man to attempt consolation, but not capable of receiving it. His austerity had placed him, as he thought, beyond it, and his father's efforts only stabbed him more keenly to the quick.

Sidney tried to believe that his father's deliberate preparation was a whim occasioned by some passing weakness, but the truth forced its way despite him, sat down before him, haunted his dreams, would not be thought away. The doctor gave no hopes; the physician whom he called in only confirmed the doctor's verdict; it was a truth from which there was no escape.

When he gave up reasoning against his own convictions, Sidney gave up his clerkship, as suddenly and with as little warning as he had vacated his stool in his uncle's counting-house.

There was a choice to make between hard work day and night at the new banking scheme—isolated completely from his dying father—and attendance, close and unremitting, to that father who had loved him truly and well, and Sidney did not hesitate.

"Afterwards, I can think of myself," he said; "let me brighten the days that are left you, to the best of my power."

"Ah! but the future?" said the father, anxious concerning his son's position in life.

"I do not care for it, or my position in it now."

"Don't say that, Sid."

"Father, I was working for you, and for your comfort in the future—now let all thoughts of the world go away for a while, and leave you and me together—thus!"

He laid his hand upon the father's, which clutched his nervously.

"Oh! but what *is* to become of you?"

"Do *you* fear my getting on, with the long years before me wherein I can work?"

"No, you are sure to rise, Sid."

Sidney did not answer.

"Unless you grow despondent at the difficulties in the way, or let some secret trouble weigh you down. Sid, my dear son, there's nothing on your mind?"

"Oh! no—nothing. Don't think that," was the quick response—the white lie, for which Sidney Hinchford deserved forgiveness.

He would keep his sorrows to himself, and not distress that death-bed by his own vain complainings against any affliction in store for *him!*

When the father grew weaker, he expressed a wish to see his brother Geoffry again.

"We don't bear each other any malice—Geoffry and I, now. If you don't mind, Sid," he said, wistfully, "I should like to shake hands with him, and bid him good-bye."

"I will write at once, Sir."

Sidney despatched his letter, and the rich banker came in his carriage to the humble dwelling-place of his younger brother. Sidney did not see his uncle; he bore him no malice; he was even grateful to him for past kindnesses, but he could not face him in his bitter grief, and listen, perhaps, to explanations which he cared nothing for in that hour. With this new care staring him in the face, the other seemed to fade away, and with it much of his past bitterness of spirit. Leave him to himself, and trouble him no more!

When the interview was over, and his uncle was gone, Sidney returned to his post by his father's bedside.

"He has been talking about you, Sid," said the father; "he seemed anxious to see you."

"I am not fit for company."

"Maurice is abroad, he tells me."

"Indeed."

Sidney changed the subject, read to his father, talked to him of the old days when the mother and wife were living—a subject on which Mr. Hinchford loved to dilate just then. But in the long, restless nights, when Sidney slept in the arm-chair by the fireplace—he left not his father day or night, and would have no hired watcher—the father, who had feigned sleep for his son's sake, lay and thought of the son's future, and was perplexed about it. His perceptive faculties had become wondrously acute, and he could see that Sidney Hinchford was unhappy—had been unhappy before the illness which had cast its shadow in that little household. There was something wrong; something which he should never know, he felt assured. Who could help him?—who could assist him to discover it?—who would think of Sid in the desolation which was to be that boy's legacy, and do his, or her, best for him?

Early the next morning, when he was very weak, he said:—

"I wonder the Wesdens haven't been to see me."

"I thought they would weary you. They are scarcely friends of ours now. I have not told them that you are ill. If you wish——"

"No, no, and they would weary you, too, my boy, and things *have* altered very much between you. Sidney, you are sorry that they have altered, perhaps?"

"No—glad—very glad!"

"I should like to see Mattie," he said, after a pause; "why does *she* keep away?"

"I thought that she might disturb you, Sir," was the reply; "we are better by ourselves, and without our friends' sympathy. We are above it!"

"Why, Sid—that's pride!"

"Call it precaution, Sir, or jealousy of anyone taking my place, between you and me, old stanch friends as we are."

His father said no more upon the question; he had been ever influenced by his son, and borne down by his strong will. He thought now that it was better to see no one but Sid, and the good clergyman who called every day—better for all! Sid knew best; he had always known best through life!

But later that day, Sidney altered his mind. He had been sitting in the arm-chair apart from his father, revolving many things in that mind, and maintaining a silence which his father even began to think was strange—he whose thoughts were few and far between now—when he said suddenly to Ann Packet, who was entering on tiptoe with a candle:—

"Ann, fetch Mattie here at once."

"Mattie, Master Sidney?—to be sure I will," she added, with alacrity; "I've been thinking about that, oh! ever so long!"

"Be quick!—don't stop! Leave a message, if she's away. Here's money, hire a cab there and back. Take the key with you and let yourself in!"

"What's that for, Sid?" asked the father.

"I think she should be here—I think all should be here who have ever known you, and whom you have expressed a wish to see. I am selfish and cruel!"

"Oh, ho!—we don't believe that, boy!" said the father, "we know better—oh! much better than that!"

"Why shouldn't the Wesdens come?—they are old friends—they were kind to you and me in the old days."

"Yes, very kind. You're quite right, Sid; but if they trouble you in the least, Sid, keep them away. I don't care about seeing anybody very much now."

"Father, you are worse," said Sidney, leaping to his feet.

"No, boy—better. A spasm or two through here," laying his hand upon his chest, "which will go off presently."

"That's well."

Sidney sat down again in his old place, muttering, "I wish she would come," and the father lay quiet and thoughtful in his bed once more.

Presently the father went off to sleep, and Sidney sat and listened, with his face turned towards the bed, all the long, long time, until the cab, containing Ann Packet and Mattie, drew up before the house.

They entered the house and came up stairs together, Mattie and Ann. Sid made no effort to stop them, though his father was in a restless sleep, from which a step would waken him—he still sat there, gloomy and apathetic. They entered the room, and Mr. Hinchford woke up at the opening of the door.

"Where's Sid?" he called.

"Here," said the son, "and here's Mattie—the old friend, adviser, comforter, at last!"

"Oh! why haven't I been told this before?—why have you all kept me so long in the dark?" said Mattie. "Oh! my dear old friend, my first kind friend of all of them!" she cried, turning to the sick bed where Mr. Hinchford was watching her.

"Tell him, Mattie, that I shall not be entirely alone or friendless when the parting comes," said Sidney; "it troubles him—I see it. Ann, don't go—one minute."

He crossed to her, laid his hand upon her arm, and went out whispering to her, leaving Mattie and Mr. Hinchford in the room together.

"Don't let him go away—the boy mustn't leave me now!" he said, in a terrified whisper. "Mattie—I'm worse! I have been keeping it back from the boy till the last, but I'm awfully worse."

Mattie glanced at him, and then ran to the door and called Sidney.

"I am coming back," said he, in reply; "speak to him, Mattie, for a while. I am wanted here."

Mattie returned to the bed-side.

"He is wanted down stairs, he says."

"Ah! don't call him up, then, Mattie—some one has heard of his cleverness, and come after him to secure him. Well, it will be a distraction to him—when—I'm gone."

"And you so ill; and I to be kept in the dark!" said Mattie, dropping into the chair at the bed's head, and looking anxiously into the haggard face.

"I have been thinking of you, Mattie," he said, in a low voice; "thinking that you might be—of use—to him in the—future."

Mattie shook her head sadly.

"Why not?" was his eager question.

"He is strong, and young, and knows the world better than I. How could I ever be of use to him?"

"He is weak—low-spirited—not like his old self now—never again, perhaps, like his old—self! Mattie, I—seem—to think so!"

"Courage, dear friend. He will be always strong; his is not a weak nature."

"Mattie, I think he should have married Harriet Wesden, after all," said he; "he loved her very dearly. She loved him, and understood how good and honourable he was, at last. What separated them? I—I forget."

And he passed his hand over his forehead, in the old vacant way.

"No matter now, perhaps. They are parted—perhaps only for a time. I have hoped so more than once."

"You have? You who guess—at the truth—so well. Why, Mattie, I—have hope, then, too—that it will not be—always dark like this."

"That's not likely."

"And if the chance comes, to bring those two together, you will do it? Oh! Mattie, you promise this, for me?"

"I promise."

"But," with a new fear visible on his face, "you will lose sight of him before the chance—of happiness—comes to the boy. You, ever apart from him—may not know——"

"Yes I shall know, always!"

"He always stood your friend, remember, Mattie," said the old man, as if endeavouring to win over Mattie heart and soul to the new cause, by all the force of reasoning left in him. He wasn't like —me, and Wesden—ever inclined to waver in his thoughts of you. He believed—in you ever—to be good and true, and you will think of this?"

"I will," was the faint reply.

Mattie had bowed her head, and it was almost hidden in the bedclothes. The old man's hand rested for an instant on the girl's raven hair.

"I have—a hope—that from you, and through your means, Sid—poor old Sid!—may find peace and comfort at last. I was thinking —of your liking for us all—this very night."

"Were you? It was kind to think of me," with a low murmur.

"And I, somehow, built my hopes on you. Do you remember how you—and I—used to talk of Sid, in that old room, in Suffolk—Street?"

"Well."

"Keep me in his memory, when he's very sad, remind him—of me—and how I loved him, Mattie," in a low, excited whisper. "I'm sure that he's in trouble—that he keeps something—back from—me!"

"A fancy, perhaps. What should he hide from you?"

"I cannot tell; it may be fancy, but it—it worries me to think of. Oh! Mattie, you'll forget him if that trouble—should come to him! You'll forget—all this—and turn to that new father of yours! And I had hope in you."

"Hope in me ever. I will not betray your trust in me. Before all—myself, father, friends—*your son!*"

"Mattie!"

The father looked with a new surprise at our heroine. He had grown very weak, but her hasty, impetuous voice, seemed for an instant to give new life unto him.

"Hush! don't betray me. Never to living soul before have I dared to tell, to breathe this! God forgive me, if I have failed to break away from all my folly, and have thought of him too much, as I, a stray from the streets, had never a right to think of one so well-born, honourable, and true. Your forgive me—you, his father?"

"Yes."

"You know all now. How, without one ambitious thought of linking his name with mine, I will love him ever, and be ever, if he need it, his true friend, and sister. I will die for him, when the time comes, and the secret will die with me, and not shame us both. Judge me, if I am likely to forget him, Sir."

"No—no—I see all now."

"Don't mistake me; don't think at the last that I would scheme for him, or ever marry him, to disgrace a family like yours. Don't think anything but that I love Harriet Wesden, also, before myself, but not before him, though I have tried so hard to live him down! and that I will do my best—always my very best—to bring about the happiness of both of them!"

"And there—may—be only one way, Mattie."

"Only one way, I hope."

"I trust you—God bless you!—you were always a good girl. Call the boy—my poor boy, Sid!"

Mattie did as requested. At a slow, almost a painfully slow pace, Sidney re-entered, his hand still on Ann Packet's arm.

"Sid—I—think I'll say good-bye, now!"

Sidney sprung forward and caught his hands.

"Not yet; not good-bye yet, Sir?"

"Why not? I don't fear to say it, Sid; I'm strong at—heart—still; it's a brave—a brave parting! No regrets—no sense of duty—neg—lected! A kind father, I hope—a—a good son—I know! God bless you, boy!—peace and happiness to yours, in life. Mattie—think—of him!"

Mattie bowed her head, and covered her face with her hands.

"Sidney—help her, too—if she's in trouble—ever an old friend."

"A true one!"

"True as steel—I know it. Good-bye, Sid—keep strong for—the—old—father's sake. Will—you?"

"Yes."

"*That's well!*"

Sid bent over him and kissed him—kissed the calm face, so awfully calm and still now! and then turned to Mattie.

"Take me away, Mattie. I can bear no more now. He was

spared one trouble, thank God! In all his life he never guessed the end of this."

Mattie turned round, with a new fear possessing her.

"Sidney; Mr. Sidney!"

"Here, Mattie," he said, stretching forth his hand, and grasping, as it were, furtively for hers. "I shall need friends now to help me."

"Not—oh! my God, not blind?"

"I have been blind all day!"

END OF THE FIFTH BOOK.

BOOK. VI.

SIDNEY'S FRIENDS.

CHAPTER I.

MATTIE'S CHOICE.

THERE are epochs in some lives when the heart cracks or hardens. When humanity, wrung to its utmost, gives way, or ossifies. Both are dangerous crises, and require more than ordinary care; the physician must be skilful and understand human nature, or his efforts at cure will only kill the patient who submits to his remedies.

Man—we speak literally of the masculine gender at this point—though born unto trouble, finds it hard to support in a philosophical way. A great trouble that in nine cases out of ten shows woman at her best, transforms man to his worst; if he be a man of the world, worldly, he is dumfounded by the calamity which has fallen upon him. It is incomprehensible why *he* should suffer—he of all men—and he wraps himself in his egotism—his wounded self-love—and thinks of the injustice and hardness that have shut him out from his labours.

Such men, heavily oppressed, do not give in to the axiom, that it is well for them to be afflicted; they will not bow to God's will, or resign themselves to it—their outward calmness is assumed, and they chafe at the Great Hand which has arrested them midway. Such men will turn misanthropes and atheists, at times.

Sidney Hinchford after all was a man of the world. In the world he had lived and fought upwards. There had been a charm in

making his way in it, and the obstacles ahead had but nerved his arm to resist and his heart to endure. He had talents for success in the commercial world—even a genius for making money. With time before him, possibly Sidney Hinchford would have risen to greatness.

To make money—and to keep it when made—requires as much genius as to make poetry, rather more, perhaps. A genius of a different order, but a very fine one notwithstanding, and one which we can admire at a distance—on the kerb stones with our manuscripts under our arms, waiting for the genius's carriage to pass, before we cross to our publishers'. Is not that man a genius who in these latter days rises to wealth by his own exertions, in lieu of having wealth thrust upon him? A genius, with wondrous powers of discrimination, not to be led into a bad thing, but seeing before other people the advantages to accrue from a good one, and making his investments accordingly. A man who peers into the future and beholds his own advancement, not the step before him, but the apex in the clouds, lost to less keen-sighted folk fighting away at the base—therefore a wonderful man.

We believe that Sidney Hinchford, like his uncle before him, would have risen in the world; he believed it also, and throughout his past career—though we have seen him anxious—he never lost his hope of ultimate success. When he knew that there must come a period of tribulation and darkness for him, he had trusted to have time left him for position; and not till time was denied him, and the darkness set in suddenly, did he give up the battle. And then he did not give way; he hardened.

Sidney had never been a religious man, therefore he sought no consolation in his affliction, and believed not in the power of religion to console. He had been pure-minded, honourable, earnest, everything that makes the good worldly man, but he had never been grateful to God for his endowments, and he bore God's affliction badly in consequence. He felt balked in his endeavour to prosper, therefore, aggrieved, and the darkness that had stolen over his senses seemed to find its way to his heart and transform him.

The clergyman, who had attended his father, attempted consolation with him, but he would have "none of it." He did not complain, he said; he had faced the worst—it was with him, and there was an end of it. Do not weary him with trite Bible-texts, but leave him to himself.

And by himself he sat down to brood over the inevitable wrong that had been done him; he, in the vigour of life and thought, shut apart from action! Once he had looked forward to a consolation even in distress, but that was to have been a long day hence. Now his day had been shortened, and the consolation was denied him. He knew that *that* was lost, and he had thought of a fight with the world to benumb the thoughts of the future; and then the world

was shut away from him also, and he was broken down, inactive and lost.

He and his uncle were the only attendants at the funeral; he was informed afterwards that Matttie had stood at the grave's edge, and seen the last of her old friend and first patron; then his uncle had left him, failing in all efforts to console him. Geoffry Hinchford offered his nephew money, all the influence at his disposal in any way or shape, but Sidney declined all coldly. He did not require help yet awhile, he had saved money; he preferred being left to himself in that desolate home; presently, when he had grown reconciled to these changes, he should find courage to think what was best; meanwhile, those who loved him—he even told Mattie that—would leave him to himself.

Mattie made no effort to intrude upon him in the early days following the double loss; she was perplexed as to her future course, her method of fulfilling that promise made to Sidney's father on his death-bed. Her common sense assured her that in the first moments of sorrow, intrusion would be not only unavailing, but irritating—and her relief in becoming of service to Sidney was but a small one at the best. In the good, far-away time she might be a humble agent in bringing Harriet Wesden and him together; Harriet who must love him out of very pity now, and forget that wounded pride which had followed the annulment of engagement.

Meanwhile, she remained quiet and watchful; busy at her dress-making, busy in her father's home, attentive to that new father whom she had found, and was very kind to her, though he scarcely seemed to understand her. Still, they agreed well together, for Mattie was submissive, and Mr. Gray had more than a fair share of his own way; and he was a man who liked his own way, and with whom it agreed vastly. But we have seen that he was a jealous man, and that Mattie's interest in Mr. Wesden had discomfited him. He was a good man we know, but jealousy got the upper hand of him at times, when he was scarcely aware of it himself, for he attributed his excitement, perhaps his envy, to very different feelings. He was even jealous of a local preacher of his own denomination, a man who had made a convert of a most vicious article—an article that he had been seeking all his life, and had never found in full perfection.

Mr. Gray over his work said little concerning Ann Packet's occasional visits to his domicile, but he objected to them notwithstanding, for they drew his daughter's attention away from himself. He liked still less Mattie's visits to Chesterfield Terrace—flying visits, when she saw Ann Packet for an hour and Sidney Hinchford for a minute, looking in at the last moment, and heralded by Ann exclaiming,

"Here's Mattie come to see you, Sir."

"Ah, Mattie!" Sid would answer, turning his face towards the

door whence the voice issued, and attempting the feeblest of smiles.

"Is there anything that I can do, Sir, for you?"

"No, girl, thank you."

He would quickly relapse into that thought again, from which her presence had aroused him—and it was a depth of thought upon which the fugitive efforts of Mattie had no effect. Standing in the shadowy doorway she would watch him for a while, then draw the door to after her and go away grieving at the change in him.

The thought occurred to her that Harriet Wesden might even at that early stage work some amount of good until she heard from Ann Packet that Harriet and her father had called one day, and that Sidney had refused an interview. He was unwell; some other day when he was better; it was kind to call, but he could not be seen then, had been his excuses sent out by the servant maid. Mattie, who had always found time to do good, and work many changes, left the result to time, until honest Ann one evening, when Mr. Gray was at work at his old post, asserted her fears that Sidney was getting worse instead of better.

"I think he'll go melancholic mad like, poor dear," she said; "and it's no good my trying to brighten him a bit—he's wus at that, which is nat'ral, not being in my line, and wanting brightening up myself. He does nothing but brood, brood, brood, sitting of a heap all day in that chair!"

"A month since his father died now," said Mattie, musing.

"To the very day, Mattie."

"He goes to church—you read the Bible to him?" asked Mr. Gray, suddenly.

"He can't go by hisself—he's not very handy with his blindness, like those who have been brought up to it with a dog and a tin mug," said Ann in reply; "but let's hope he'll get used to it, and find it a comfort to him, Sir."

"I asked you also, young woman, if you ever read the Bible to him?"

"Lor bless you, Sir! I can't read fit enough for him—I take a blessed lot of spelling with it, and it aggravates him. All the larning I've ever had, has come from this dear gal of ours, and *he* taught her first of all!"

"I think that I could do this young man good," said Mr. Gray, suddenly; "I might impress him with the force of the truth—*convert him.*"

"I would not attempt to preach to him yet," suggested Mattie; "besides, his is a strange character—you will never understand it."

"You cannot tell what I may be able to understand," he replied, "and I see that my duty lies in that direction. I have been seeking amongst the poor and wretched for a convert, and perhaps it is nearer home—your friend!"

"I would not worry him in his distress," suggested Mattie anew.

"Worry him!—Mattie, you shock me! Where's my Bible?—I'll go at once!"

"We've got Bibles in the house, Sir—we're not cannibals," snapped Ann. Cannibals and heathens were of the same species to Ann Packet.

"Come on, then!"

Mattie half rose, as if with the intention ot accompanying her father, but he checked the movement.

"I hope you will remain at home to-night, Mattie," he said; "I never liked the house entirely left. It's not business."

Mattie sat down again. She was fidgety at the result of this impromptu movement on her father's part, but saw no way to hinder it. Her father was a man who meant well, but well-meaning men would not do for Sidney Hinchford. Sidney had been well educated; her father was self-taught, and brusque, and Sidney had grown irritable. In her own little conceited heart she believed that no one could manage Sidney Hinchford save herself. Late in the evening, Mr. Gray returned in excellent spirits, rubbing one hand over the other complacently. He had found a new specimen worthy of his powers of conversion.

"Have you seen him?" asked Mattie.

"To be sure—I went to see him, and he could not keep me out of the room, if I chose to enter. An obstinate young man—as obstinate a young man as I ever remember to have met with in all my life!"

"Did he speak to you?"

"Only twice, once to ask how you were. The second time to tell me that he did not require any preaching to. After that, I read the Bible to him for an hour, locking the door first, to make sure that he did not run for it, blind as he was. Then I gave him the best advice in my power, bade him good night and came away. He is as hard as the nether millstone; it will be a glorious victory over the devil to touch his heart and soften it!"

"You are going the wrong way to work. You do not know him!"

"My dear, I know that he's a miserable sinner."

Mattie said no more on the question; she was not a good hand at argument. At argument, sword's point to sword's point, possibly Mr. Gray would have beaten most men; his ideas were always in order, and he could pounce upon the right word, reason, or text, in an instant; but Mattie was certain that her father's zeal very often outran his discretion. She shuddered as she pictured Sidney Hinchford a victim to her father's obtrusiveness—her father, oblivious to suffering, and full of belief in the conversion he was attempting. She knew that her father was wrong, and she felt vexed that Sidney had been intruded upon at a time wherein

she had not found the courage to face him herself. Things must be altered, and her promise to Sid's father must not become a dead letter. In all the world her heart told her she loved Sidney Hinchford best, and that she could make any sacrifice for his sake; and yet, Sidney was not getting better, but worse, and her own father would make her hateful to him. The next evening, Mr. Gray came home later than usual. He had been sent for by his employers, had received their commissions, and then, fraught with his new idea, had started for Chesterfield Terrace, to strike a second mortal blow at his new specimen.

He came home late, as we have intimated, and began arranging his chimney ornaments, and putting things a little straight, in his usual nervous fashion.

"Mattie, I shall have a job with that young man. He has forbidden me the house; he actually—actually swore at me this evening, for praying for his better heart and moral regeneration."

Mattie compressed her lips and looked thoughtfully before her for a while. Then the dark eyes turned suddenly and unflinchingly upon her father.

"I have been thinking lately that if I were with him in that house—I, who know him so well—I might do much good."

"You, Mattie!—you?"

"He is without a friend in the world. I knew his father, who was my first friend, and I feel that I am neglecting the son."

"You call there often enough, goodness knows!" Mr. Gray said, a little sharply.

"He is alone—he is blind. What are a few minutes in a long day to him?"

"All this is very ridiculous, Mattie—speaks well for your kind heart, and so on, but, of course, can't be——"

"Of course, must be!"

Mattie had a will of her own when it was needed. A little did not disturb her, but a great deal of opposition could never shake that will when once made up. She had resolved upon her next step, and would proceed with it; we do not say that she was in the right; we will not profess to constitute her a model heroine in the sight of our readers, who have had enough of model heroines for a while, and may accept our stray for a change. We are even inclined to believe that Mattie was, in this instance, just a little in the wrong—but then her early training had been defective, and allowance must be made for it. All the evil seeds that neglect has sown in the soil are never entirely eradicated—ask the farmers of land, and the *farmers of souls*.

"Must be!" repeated Mr. Gray, looking in a dreamy manner at his daughter.

"I promised his father to think of him—to study him by all the means in my power. I see that no one understands him but

me, and I hear that he is sinking away from all that made him good and noble. I will do my best for him, and there is no one who can stop me here."

"Your father!"

"—Is a new friend, who has been kind to me, and whom I love—but he hasn't the power to make me break my promise to the dead. That man is desolate, and heavily afflicted, and I will go to him!"

"Against MY wish?"

"Yes—against the wishes of all in the world—if they were uttered in opposition to me!" cried Mattie.

"Then," looking very firm and white, "you will choose between him and me. He will be a friend the more, and I a daughter the less."

"It cannot be helped."

"You never loved me, or you would never thus defy me. Girl, you are going into danger—the world will talk, and rob you of your good name."

"Let it," said Mattie, proudly. "It has spoken ill before of me, and I have lived it down. I shall not study it, when the interest and happiness of a dear friend are at stake. He is being killed by all you!" she cried, with a comprehensive gesture of her hand; "now let me try!"

"Mattie, you are mad—wrong—wicked!—I have no patience with you—I have done with you, if you defy me thus."

"I am doing right—you cannot stop me. I have done wrong to remain idle here so long; I will go at once."

"At once!—breaking up this home—you will, then?"

"If I remain here longer, you will set him against me—me, who would have him look upon me as his sister, his one friend left to pray for him, slave for him, and keep his enemies away!"

"I won't hear any more of this rhodomontade—this voice of the devil on the lips of my child," he said, snatching up his hat again. "Stay here till I return, or go away for ever."

Mr. Gray was in a passion, and, like most men in a passion, went the wrong way to work. He was jealous of this new rival to his daughter's love that had sprung up, and angered with Mattie's attempt to justify her new determination. He believed in Mattie's obedience, and his own power over her yet; and he was an obstinate man, whom it took a long while to subdue. He went out of the room wildly gesticulating, and Mattie sat panting for a while, and trying to still the heaving of her bosom. She had gone beyond herself—perhaps betrayed herself—but she had expressed her intention, and nothing that had happened since had induced her to swerve. If it were a choice between her father and Sidney, why it must be Sidney, if he would have her for his friend and companion in the future.

"I must go—I must go at once!" she whispered to herself; and then hurriedly put on her bonnet and shawl, and made for the staircase. She thought that she was doing right, and that good would come of it; and she did not hesitate. Before her, in the distance, sat the solitary figure of him she loved, friendless, alone, and benighted; and her woman's heart yearned to go to him, and forgot all else.

Thus forgetting, thus yearning to do good, Mattie made a false step, and turned her back upon her father's home.

CHAPTER II.

MATTIE'S ADVISER.

Mattie reached Chesterfield Terrace as the clock was striking nine. Ann Packet almost shouted with alarm at the sight of the new visitor, and then looked intently over Mattie's shoulder.

"*He* hasn't come back again, has he? Mr. Sidney's been in such a dreffful way about him, Mattie. Blind as he is, I think he'll try to murder him."

"I have come instead. He will see me, I hope."

She did not wait to be announced, but turned the handle of the parlour door and entered. Sidney Hinchford, in a harsh voice, cried out,

"Who's there?"

"Only Mattie. May I come in?"

"Mattie here at this hour! Come in, if you will. What is it?"

He was seated in the great leathern arm-chair, that had been his father's favourite seat, in the old attitude that Mattie knew so well now. She shuddered at the change in him—the wreck of manhood that one affliction had reduced him to, and the impulse that had brought her there was strengthened.

"Mr. Sidney," she said, approaching, "I have come to ask a favour of you."

"I am past dispensing favours, Mattie. Unless—unless it's to listen patiently to that horrible father of yours. Then I say No—for he drives me mad with his monotony."

"I have come to defend you from him, if he call again—to live here, and take care of you as a dear brother who requires care, and must not be left entirely to strangers."

"I am better by myself, Mattie—fit company only for myself."

"No, the worst of company for that."

"It must not be."

"I can earn my own living; I shall be no burden to you; I have a hope—such a grand hope, Sir!—of making this home a different place to you. Why, I can always make the best of it, I think—*he* thought so, too, before he died."

"Who—my father?" asked Sidney, wondering.

"Yes—he wished that I should come here, and I promised him. Oh! Mr. Sidney, for a little while, before you have become resigned to this great trouble, let me stay!"

He might have read the truth—the whole truth—in that urgent pleading, but he was shut away from light, and sceptical of any love for him abiding anywhere throughout the world.

"If he wished it, Mattie—stay. If your father says not 'No' to this, why, stay until you tire of me, and the utter wretchedness of such a life as mine."

"Why utterly wretched?"

"I don't know—don't ask again."

"Others have been afflicted like you before, Sir, and borne their heavy burden well."

"Why do you 'Sir' me? That's new."

"I called your father Sir,—you take your father's place," said Mattie, hastily.

"A strange reason—I wonder if it's true."

Mattie coloured, but he could not see her blushes, and whether true or false, mattered little to him then. A new suspicion seized him after a while, when he had thought more deeply of Mattie's presence there.

"If this is a new trick of your father's to preach to me through you, I warn you, Mattie."

"I have told you why I am here."

"No other reason but that promise to my father?"

"Yes, one promise more—to myself. Mr. Hinchford," she said, noticing his sudden start, "I promised my heart, when I was very young—when I was a stray!—that it should never swerve from those who had befriended me. It will not—it beats the faster with the hope of doing service to all who helped me in my wilful girlhood."

"I told a lie, and said you did not steal my brooch!"

"That was not all, but that taught me gratitude. Say a lie, but it was a lie that saved me from prison—from the new life, worse, a thousand times worse than the first."

"You are a strange girl—you were always strange. I am

curious to know how soon you will tire of me, or I shall tire of you and this new freak. When I confess you weary me—you will go?"

"Yes."

"Then stay—and God help you with your charge."

His lip curled again, but it was with an effort. He was no true stoic, and Mattie's earnestness had moved him more than he cared to evince. He was curious to note the effect of Mattie's efforts to make the dull world anything better than it was—he who knew how simple-minded and ingenuous Mattie was, and how little she could fathom his thoughts, or understand them. He had spent a month of horrible isolation, and it had seemed long years to him—years in which he had aged and grown grey perhaps, it was more likely than not. He felt like an old man, with whom the world was a weary resting-place; and he was despondent enough to wish to die, and end the tragedy that had befallen him. He had not believed in any sacrifice for his sake, and Mattie had surprised him by stealing in upon his solitude, and offering her help. He was more surprised to think that he had accepted her services in lieu of turning contemptuously away. It was something new to think of, and it did him good.

The next day life began anew under Mattie's supervision. She was the old Mattie of Great Suffolk Street days—a brisk step and a cheerful voice, an air of bustle and business about her, which it was pleasant to hear in the distance. When the house duties were arranged for the day, Mattie began her needlework in the parlour where Sidney sat; and though Sidney spoke but little, and replied only in monosyllables to her, yet she could see the change was telling upon him, and she felt that there would come a time when he would be his dear old self again. When the day was over, her own troubles began. In her own room, she thought of the father whom she had abandoned—of *his* loneliness, left behind at his work in that front top room, which had been home to her. She was not sorry that she had left him, for there was an old promise, an old love for Sidney, to buoy her up; but she was very, very sorry that they had parted in anger, and that her father had resented a step in which his Christian charity should have at once encouraged her. By and bye it would all come right, her father would understand her and her motives; by and bye, when Sidney had become reconciled to his lot in life, and there were no more duties to fulfil, she would return home, unasked even, and offer to be again the daughter whom her father had professed to love. For the present, life in Sidney's home, doing her duty by him whom she loved best in the world; she could not let him suffer, and not do her best to work a change in him.

Mattie worked a change—a great one. The instinct that assured her she possessed that power had not deceived her; and Sidney,

though he became never again his former self, altered for the better. This change strengthened Mattie in her resolves, and made amends for her father's silence. She had written to Mr. Gray a long letter a few days after she had left his home, explaining her conduct more fully, entering more completely into the details of her former relations to the Hinchfords and the friends she had found in them; trusting that her father would believe that she loved him none the less for the step which she had taken—she who would have been more happy had he consented thereto—and hoping for the better days when she could return and take once more her place beside him. She had also asked in her letter that her box might be sent her, and he had considered that request as the one object of her writing, and responded to it by the transmission of the box and its contents, keeping back all evidence of his own trouble and anger. She had chosen her lot in life, he thought; she had preferred a stranger's home to her own flesh and blood; in the face of the world's opinion she had gone to nurse a man of three and twenty years of age. After all, she had never loved her father; he had come too late in life before her, and it was his fate never to gain affection from those on whose kind feelings he had a claim. He had been unlucky in his loves, and he must think no more of them. His troubles were earthly, and on earthly affections he must not dwell too much—he must teach himself to soar above them all.

He read the Bible more frequently than ever, attended less to his work, and more to his district society and local preaching; by all the means in his power he turned his thoughts away from Mattie. When the thought was too strong for him, he connected her with the wrong that she had done him, and so thought uncharitably of her, as good men have done before and since his time—good people being fallible and liable to err.

Mattie knew nothing of her father's trouble, and judged him as she had seen him last—angry and uncharitable and jealous! That is a bad habit of connecting friends whom we have given up with the stormy scene which cut the friendship adrift; of stereotyping the last impression—generally the false one—and connecting *that* with him and her for ever afterwards. Think of the virtues that first drew us towards them, and not of the angry frown and the bitter word that set us apart; in the long run we shall find it answer, and have less wherewith to accuse ourselves.

Sidney Hinchford, whom we are forgetting, altered then for the better slowly, but surely—even imperceptibly to himself. Still, when Mattie had been a month with him, and he looked back upon the feelings which had beset him before she took her place in his home, the change struck him at last. He could appreciate the kindness and self-denial that had brought her there, gladdened his home, and made his heart lighter. He could take pleasure in speaking with

her of the old times, of his father, of his early days in Suffolk Street —in hearing her read to him, in being led into an argument with her, which promoted a healthy excitation of the mind, in walking with her when the days were fine. He was grateful for her services, and touched by them—she was his sister, whom he loved very dearly, and whom to part with would be another trial in store for him some day—and he had thought his trials were at an end long since!

Sidney Hinchford, be it observed here, made but a clumsy blind man; he had little of that concentrativeness of the remaining senses, which make amends for the deprivation of one faculty. He neither heard better, nor was more sensitive to touch—and of this he complained a little peevishly, as though he had been unfairly dealt with.

"I haven't even been served like other blind folk," he said; "your voice startles me at times as though it were strange to me."

On one topic he would never dwell—the Wesdens. Mattie, true to the dying wish of the old man, attempted to bring the subject round to Harriet—Harriet, who was true to him yet, she believed—but the subject vexed him, and evinced at once all that new irritability which had been born with his affliction.

"Let the past die—it is a bitter memory, and I dislike it," he would say; "now let us talk of the business which you think of setting me up in, and seeing me off in, before all the money is spent on housekeeping."

Mattie turned to that subject at his request—it was one that pleased and diverted him. He was glad to speak of business; it sounded as if he were not quite dead yet. Mattie and he had spent many an hour in dilating upon the chances of opening a shop with the residue of the money which Sidney had saved before his illness —what shop it should be, and how it should be attended! He had only one reason for delaying the prosecution of the scheme—Mattie had implied more than once that when a shopkeeper was found, she should give up constant attendance upon him, and only call now and then to make sure that he was well, and not being imposed upon.

"To think of turning shopkeeper in my old age!" he said one day, with quite a cheerful laugh at his downfall; "I, Sidney Hinchford, bank clerk, who had hoped to make a great name in the City. Well, it is commerce still, and I shall have a fair claim to respectability, as the wholesalers say, if I don't give short weight, or false measure, Mattie."

"To be sure you will. But why do you not settle your mind to one business? Every day, Mr. Sidney, you think of a new one!"

"You must not blame me for that, Mattie," he replied; "I want

to make sure of the most suitable, to find one in which I could take part myself."

"What do you think of the old business in which Mr. Wesden made money?—think of that whilst I am gone."

"Where are you going now?" he asked a little irritably.

"To scold the butcher for yesterday's tough joint," said Mattie.

"Butchers make money, but how the deuce could I chop up a sheep without personal damage?" he said, rambling off to a new idea.

Mattie hurried to the door. The butcher was certainly there; but, crossing the road in the direction of the house, Mattie had seen Harriet Wesden. The butcher was dismissed, and Harriet admitted silently into the passage.

"How long have *you* been here?" Harriet exclaimed.

"A month now. I promised his father that I would do my best for *him* left behind in trouble. You—you don't blame me?"

"Blame you!—no. Why should I?"

"My father thought that I was wrong to come here—exceeding my duty to my neighbour, and outraging my duty towards him. But I am not sorry."

"And Sid—how is he now? Why does he bear so much malice in his heart against me, as to refuse me admittance to his house?" she asked.

"He bears no malice, Harriet; but the past is painful to him. Presently he will come round, and judge all things truly. Every day he is less morbid—more resigned."

"I am glad of that."

"After all, everything has turned out for the best, Harriet," said Mattie.

"Prove that," was her quick answer.

Mattie was attempting the difficult task of deciphering the real thoughts of Harriet Wesden;—what she regretted, and what she rejoiced at;—now the picture was finished, and all its deep shadowing elaborated.

"For the best that the engagement was ended, Harriet. Think of the affliction that has befallen him, and which would have parted him and you at last."

"Why parted us?—do you think, had it befallen me, that he would have turned away with horror—that he would not have loved me all the better, and striven all the harder to render my trouble less heavy to be borne? Mattie, I knew that this would come upon him years ago, and I did not shrink from my engagement."

"You could never have married him—he is a poor man, and may be poorer yet; it is impossible to say."

"It is all over now, and this is idle talk, Mattie. I have given up all thought of him, as he has given up all thought of me—and perhaps it *is* for the best," she added.

"We will hope so, Harriet."

"I was always a foolish and vain girl, prone to change my mind, and scarcely knowing what that mind was," she said bitterly. "It is easy enough to forget."

Mattie scarcely understood her. She shook her head in dissent, and would have turned the conversation by asking after her father's health—Harriet's own health, which was not very evident on her pale cheeks just then. Harriet darted away from the subject.

"Well—all well," she said; "and how is Sidney in health, you have not told me that?"

"Better in health. I have said that his mind is more at ease."

"Mattie, though I have given him up for ever, though I know that I am nothing to him now, and deserve to be nothing, let me see him again! I am going into the country with father for a week or two, and should like to see him once more before I go."

"Harriet, you love him still! You are not glad that it is all ended between you!"

"I should have been here in your place—I have a right to be here!" she said, evasively.

"Tell him so."

Mattie had turned pale, but she pointed to the parlour with an imperious hand. Harriet shrank from the boldness of the step, and turned pale also.

"I—I—"

"This is no time for false delicacy between you and him," said Mattie; "he loves you in his heart—he is only saddened by the past belief that you loved Maurice Darcy—if you do not shrink to unite your fate with his, and make his life new and bright again, ask him to be your husband. In his night of life he dare not ask you now."

"I cannot do that," murmured Harriet; "that is beyond my strength."

"You and your father with him in his affliction, taking care of him and rendering him happy! All in your hands, and you shrink back from him!"

"Not from him, but from the bitterness of his reply to me," said Harriet. "Would you dare so much in my place?"

"I—I think so. But then," she added, "I do not understand what true love is—you said so, once, if you remember."

Harriet detected something strange and new in Mattie's reply; she looked at Mattie, who was flushed and agitated. For the first time in her life, a vague far-off suspicion seemed to be approaching her.

"I will go in and see him—I will be ruled by what he says to me. Leave me with him, Mattie."

With her own impulsiveness, which had led her right and wrong, she turned the handle of the parlour door, and entered the room, where the old lover, blind and helpless, sat.

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD LOVERS.

YES, there he was, the old lover! The man whom she had once believed she should marry and make happy—whom she had valued at his just worth when he cast her off as unworthy of the love he had borne her. She had not seen him since that time; he had held himself aloof from her, although he had talked of remaining still her friend, and the change in him was pitiable to witness.

It was the same handsome face, for all its pallor, and deep intensity of thought; the same intellectuality expressed therein, for all the blindness which had come there, and given that strange unearthly look to eyes still clear and bright, and which turned towards her, and startled her with their expression yet. But he was thin and wasted, and his hand, which rested on the table by his side, was an old man's hand, seared by age, and trembling as with palsy.

"What a time you have been, Mattie! Ah! you are growing tired of me at last," he said, with the querulousness characteristic of illness, but before then ever so uncharacteristic of him.

"Miss—Miss Wesden called to ask how you were," said Harriet, in a low voice.

"Indeed!" he said, after a moment's deliberation of that piece of information; "and you answered her, and let her go away, sparing me the pain of replying for myself. That's well and kind of you, Mattie. We are better by ourselves now."

"Yes."

Harriet dropped into a chair by the door, and clasped her hands together; he spoke firmly; he spoke the truth as he thought, and she accepted it for truth, and said no more.

Sidney Hinchford, oblivious of the visitor facing him, and composed in his blindness, detected no difference in the voice. Mattie's voice, we have remarked at an earlier stage of this narrative, closely resembled Harriet's, and acuteness of ear had not been acquired yet by the old lover.

"Mattie, I have been thinking of a new business for us, since you have been gone."

"For us?" gasped Harriet.

"Ah! for us, if I can persuade you to remain my housekeeper, and induce your father to extend his consent. I have no other friend; I look to you, girl; you must not desert me yet!"

"No."

"I fancy the stationery business, with you to help me, Mattie, would be best, after all. You are used to it, and I could sit in the parlour and take stock, and help you with the figures in the accounts. I was always clever at mental arithmetic, and it don't strike me that I shall be quite a dummy. And then when I am used to the place—when I can find the drawers, and know what is in them, I shall be an able custodian of the new home, capable of minding shop while you go to your friends for a while. Upon my honour, Mattie, I'm quite high-spirited about this; say it's a bargain, girl?"

Harriet answered in the affirmative for Mattie. She had assumed her character and could not escape. She had resolved to go away, and make no sign to him of her propinquity; he cared not for her now; he dismissed her with a passing nod; it was all Mattie—Mattie, in whom he believed and trusted, and on whose support in the future he built upon from that day! She knew how the story would end for him and Mattie—a peaceful and happy ending, and what both had already thought of, perhaps; let it be so, she was powerless to act, and it was not her place to interfere. Mattie had deceived her; it was natural—but she saw no longer darkly through the glass; beyond there was the successful rival, whom Sidney Hinchford would marry out of gratitude!

Sidney continued to dilate upon the prospects in life before him. Harriet had risen, and was standing with her hand upon the door, watching her opportunity to escape.

"Who would have dreamed of a man becoming resigned to an utter darkness, Mattie? Who would have thought of me in particular, cut out for a man of action, with no great love for books, or for anything that fastened me down to the domesticities?"

"You are resigned, then?"

"Well—almost."

"I am very glad."

"Why are you standing by the door, Mattie? Why don't you sit down and talk a little of this business of ours?"

"Presently."

"Now—just for a little while. Leave Ann Packet to the lower regions—I'm as talkative to-day as an old woman of sixty. Why, you will not balk me, Mattie?"

"No."

"Read this for me; I have been trying if I can write in the dark—my first attempt at a benighted penmanship."

He held a paper towards her, and Harriet left her post by the door to receive it from his hands.

The writing was large and irregular, but distinct. She shivered as she read the words. The story she had seen so plainly, was more evident than ever.

"*Sidney Hinchford,*" she read, "*saved from shipwreck by Mattie Gray!*"

"And Mattie Gray here at my side accounts for my resignation," said he, laying his hand upon Harriet's. "Mattie, the old friend—after all, the best and truest!"

Harriet did not reply; she shrank more and more, cowering from him as though he saw her there, the unwelcome guest who had forced herself upon him.

"You are going out," he said, noticing the glove upon the hand he had relinquished now.

"Yes, for a little while."

"Don't be long. Where are you going, that I cannot accompany you?"

"On business; I shall be back in an instant."

"Very well," he said, with half a sigh; "but remember that you have chosen yourself to be my protector, sister, friend, and that I cannot bear you too long away from me. I wish I were more worthy of your notice, that I could return it in some way or fashion not distasteful to you. Sometimes I wish——"

"Say no more!" cried Harriet, with a vehemence that startled him; "I am going away."

The door clanged to, and left him alone. She had hurried from the room, shocked at the folly, the mockery of affection which had risen to his lips. Ah! he was a fool still, he thought; he had frightened Mattie by hovering on the verge of that proposal, which he had considered himself bound to make, perhaps, out of gratitude for the life of servitude Mattie had chosen for herself. He had been wrong; he had taken a mean advantage, and rendered Mattie's presence there embarrassing; his desire to be grateful had scared her from him, as well it might—he, a blind man, prating of affection! He had been a fool and coward; he would seal his lips from that day forth, and be all that was wished of him—nothing more. Harriet had made her escape into the narrow passage, had contrived to open the street-door, and was preparing to hurry away, when Mattie came towards her.

"Going away without a good-bye, Harriet?"

"I had forgotten," she said, coldly.

"What have you said to him?—have you—have you——"

"I have said nothing at which you have reason to feel alarmed," said Harriet; "I have not taken your advice. He thinks and speaks only of you, and I did not break upon his thoughts by any harsh reminiscences."

"You are excited, Harriet; don't go away yet, with that look. What does it mean?"

"Nothing."

"Has he offended you?"

"No."

"Have I?"

"No," was the cold reiteration. "I am not well. I ought not to have intruded here. I see my mistake, and will not come again."

"I hope you will, many, many times. I build upon you assisting me in the good work I have begun here. You and I together, in the future, striving for the old friend, Sidney Hinchford."

"I am going away to-morrow; it is doubtful when I shall return, or what use I shall be to either you or him. You understand him better than I do."

"I do not understand you this afternoon," said Mattie, surveying her more intently; "what have I done? Don't you," she added, as a new thought of hers seemed to give a clue to Harriet's, "think it right that I should be here?"

"If you think so, Mattie, it cannot matter what my opinion is."

"Yes—to me."

"You came hither with the hope of befriending him, as a sister might come? On your honour, with no other motive?"

"On my honour, with none other."

"Why deceive him, then?" was the quick rejoinder; "why tell him that your father gave his consent for your stay here, when he was so opposed to it?"

"He thought so from the first, and I did not undeceive him, lest he should send me away. Have you seen my father?"

"He called last night at our house. He is anxious and distressed about you."

"I am sorry."

"He thinks that you have no right to be here; I think you have now."

"Oh! Harriet, you do not think——"

"Hush! say nothing. You are your own mistress, and I am not angry with you. You have been too good a friend of mine, for me to envy any act of kindness towards him I loved once. I don't love him now."

"You said you did."

"A romantic fancy; I have been romantic from a child. It is all passed away now; remember that when he——"

"When he—*what?*"

"Asks you to be his wife, to become his natural protector; you alone can save him now from desolation—never my task—never now my wish. Good-bye."

She swept away coldly and proudly, leaving the amazed Mattie watching her departure. What did she mean?—what had Sidney said to her that she should go away like that, distrusting her and the motives which had brought her there—she, of all women in the world?

Mattie went back to Sidney's room excited and trembling. Close to his side before she startled him by her voice.

"Mr. Sidney, long ago you were proud of being straightforward in your speech—of telling the plain truth, without prevarication."

"Time has not changed me, I hope, Mattie."

"What have you said to Harriet Wesden?"

"To whom?"

The horror on his face expressed the facts of the case at once, before the next words escaped him.

"It was—Harriet Wesden, then?"

"Yes."

"And she came in to see me, and assumed your character, Mattie?" he said; "why did you let her in?"

"I don't know," murmured Mattie; "she was anxious about you, and she had come hither to make inquiries without intruding upon you, until I—I advised her to come."

"For what reason?" he asked, in a low tone.

"I thought that you two might become better friends again, and——"

"Ah! no more of that," he interrupted; "that was like my good sister Mattie, striving for everybody's happiness except her own, perhaps. Mattie, you talk as if I had my sight, and were strong enough to win my way in life yet. You so quick of perception, and with such a knowledge of the world—you!" he reiterated.

"Misfortune will never turn Harriet Wesden away from any one whom she has loved—it would not stand in the way of any true woman. And oh! Sir, if I may speak of her once again—just this once—"

"You may not," was his fierce outcry. "Mattie, I ask you not, in mercy to me!"

"Why?" persisted Mattie.

"I don't know; let me be in peace."

It was his old sullenness—his old gloom. Back from the past into which Mattie's efforts had driven it, stole forth that morbid despondency which had kept him weak and hopeless. The remainder of that day the old enemy was too strong for any effort of Sidney's strange companion, and Mattie felt disheartened by her ill success.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW DECISION.

Sidney Hinchford rose the next morning in better spirits, and Mattie in worse. Half the night in his own room Sidney had reflected on his vexatious sullenness of the preceding day; and on the effect it must have had on Mattie; half the night, Mattie in her room had pondered on the strangeness of the incidents of the last four-and-twenty hours—on that new demeanour of Harriet Wesden, which implied so much, and yet explained so little.

After all, Mattie thought, was she right in staying there? Had she treated her father well in leaving him without a fair confession of that truth which she had breathed into the ears of a dying man, and scarcely owned till then unto herself? She had not come there with any sinister design of winning, by force as it were, a place in Sidney Hinchford's heart; she had never dreamed for an instant—she did not dream then!—of ever becoming his wife, with a right to take her place at his side and fight his battles for him.

She had been actuated by motives the purest and the best—but who believed her? Had not her father mistrusted her? Had not Harriet, who understood her so well, she thought, regarded her as one scheming for herself?—she, whose only scheme was to bring two lovers together once more, and see them happy at each other's side? For an instant she had not thought that she was "good enough" for Sidney Hinchford; she who had been an outcast from society, an object of suspicion to the police, a beggar, and a thief! No matter that she had been saved from destruction and was now living an exemplary life, or that misfortune had altered Sidney and rendered him dependent on another's help, he was still the being above her by birth, education, position, and she could but offer him disgrace.

With that conviction impressed upon her, conscious that Sidney had improved and would continue to improve, an object of distrust to her best friends—why not to the neighbours who watched them about the streets and talked about them?—only judged fairly and honourably by him she served, was it right to stop—was there any need for further stay there?

She was thinking of this over breakfast—afterwards in her little business round, during which period another visitor had forced

himself into Sidney's presence, without exercising much courtesy in the effort. Ann Packet had opened the street door, and looked inclined to shut it again, had not the visitor forestalled her—she was never very quick in her movements—by springing on to the mat, and thence with a bound to the parlour door.

"Oh, my goodness! you mustn't go in there. Master left word that you were never to be shown into him again on any pretence."

"Where's Mattie?"

"Gone out for orders," said Ann. "Just step in this room, Sir, and wait a bit."

"Young woman, I shall do nothing of the kind. When my daughter comes in, tell her where I am. That's your business; mind it if you please."

Mr. Gray turned the handle of the door, and walked into the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Hinchford."

Sidney recognised that voice at least—the voice of a man who had worried him to death with his religious opinions—and his face lengthened.

"You here?"

"Yes, I have come again," he answered, drawing a chair close to the table, and confronting Sidney. "I suppose you thought that I had given you up as irreclaimable."

"I had hoped so," was the dry answer.

"Given my daughter up too."

"No; that wasn't likely."

"Indeed—why not?"

"We don't give up our best friends, those who have won upon our hearts most, in a hurry."

"Do you mean that for me, or is that another side to your confounded obstinacy? Won't you give her up to me, her father?"

"If you wish it. I cannot set myself in opposition to you. The remembrance of a dear father of my own would not lead me, did I possess the power, to stand in opposition to you."

"You—will side with me, then, in telling her that it is not right to stay here?"

"Not right! You thought so once?"

"Not for an instant."

"She is here with your consent?"

"Did she tell you that? Don't please say that my Mattie ever told you that?"

Sidney considered. No, she had not said so, he remembered.

"She came against my will, full of a foolish idea of doing you good, and no power of mine could stop her," said Gray.

"Against your will?"

"I said she did," said Mr. Gray, sharply; "don't you believe me?"

"Yes—I believe you. But this is very singular."

Sidney bit his nails, and reflected on this new discovery. After a few moments he said,

"Mr. Gray, I have been forgiving you all the past torture for the sake of your kindness in allowing Mattie to constitute herself my guardian."

"Rubbish!"

"My guardian angel, I might say; for she has saved me from despair, and turned my thoughts away from many deep and bitter things. I was turning against myself, my life, my God, in the very despair of being of use in the world, and she saved me. Do you blame her coming now?"

Mr. Gray took time to consider that question. He bit his nails in his turn, and looked steadily at the young man, who had altered very much for the better.

"I don't find fault with the result—there!" and Mr. Gray looked as though he had made a great concession.

"You would not be a true minister if you did," said Sidney; "and you are not a true father if you don't value the sterling gold in Mattie's character. Pure gold, with no dross in the crucible—not an atom's worth, as I'm a living sinner!"

"We're all living sinners, young man," said he, getting up and beginning to pace the room, as he had paced it, preaching meanwhile, a month ago, and nearly driven Sidney Hinchford out of his mind.

"Do you object to sitting down?" asked Sidney, after bearing with these heavy perambulations for a time.

"Presently; I am going to speak to you in a minute."

"Not in the old fashion, please," said Sidney, quite plaintively; "although I can put up with more now; for Mattie's sake I'll even listen to a sermon, if you'll give me fair warning when you're going to begin, and how long it is likely to last."

"For your soul's sake, as well as Mattie's, you mean, I hope?"

"Anything—anything you like!"

"As careless of heavenly matters as ever, I believe. The task reformation still unperformed—perhaps left for me, unworthy instrument that I am."

"Exactly."

"Eh?"

"We are all unworthy instruments as well as living sinners, you know," said Sidney, drily.

"And flippant, too—and on such a subject! But we shall change you in good time."

"And this morning, now, you will let me off with a small sermon?"

"I haven't come to sermonise to-day," replied Mr. Gray, severely, "therefore do not give way to any groundless fears of torturing on my part."

"Thank you—thank you!"

"I have come to test your sense of justice—fairness of what is due to me from you, and Mattie."

"Test it, friend."

"Give me back my daughter!"

"Why, that's what Brabantio says in the play; but I'll give you a more gracious answer than he got. If you wish her to return with you—why, she must. I would not stop her," he added, with a sigh, "if it were in my power."

"You will persuade her to return with me."

"Was she happy with you?"

"Until your father died—yes."

"I will tell her," said Sidney; "that there is right on your side—Mattie will see that. There was right on hers, too, for she had made a solemn promise to a dying man, and she knew well enough that I was desolate. I will persuade her even, if you wish it, but——"

"Go on."

"But what harm is she doing here?"

"What harm!" echoed Mr. Gray, with an elevated voice; "why, harm to that good name which she has kept for years. What do you fancy people think of her being in this house?—her a stranger to you by blood, and you so young! Sir, she has risked her character by staying here—and I doubt very much if the world is likely to believe her own version of this extraordinary freak."

"Do you believe it?" asked Sidney.

"Well—I do."

"And I also—that makes two out of a very few for whose good opinion Mattie Gray cares."

"Whilst we are in the world we should care for the world's opinion, Mr. Hinchford."

"I think not, when it's a false one. You a minister, telling me to study the world!"

"I never said that—how aggravating you are to be sure!"

"Pardon me," said Sidney, quickly; "a misinterpretation, Mr. Gray. And we must study the world after all—you're right enough. Poor Mattie, what would she think of this hiss of slander in her ears?"

"I warned her of it—and she braved me."

"Ah! A brave girl, whose reward will come in a brighter world than this. Well," he added, sadly, "go she must. I agree with you."

"I am very much obliged to you—I am going to shake hands with you."

Mr. Gray and Sidney Hinchford shook hands. Sidney held the minister's tightly in his grip whilst he uttered the next words.

"You will bring her with you now and then, to hinder me from wholly sinking back," he said; "remember that she is but the one old friend of the past whom I care to know is by my side, and in whom I can trust. Remember what she found me, what she leaves me, and if you are not wholly selfish, you will not always keep her away.

Mr. Gray was touched by this appeal—his old jealousy vanished completely—he was proud in his heart of this young man's interest in Mattie.

"I promise that until we go away, that is, of course."

"Go away!—whither?"

"Oh! nothing is settled—there was a little talk of appointing me a missionary abroad some time ago—a preacher at a foreign station, where the benighted require stirring words, and the preacher is expected to be continually stirring—preaching, I mean. But it is only talk, perhaps—they may have found a better man," he added, a little tetchily.

"Should you care to leave England?"

"Care, Sir!—it is my great ambition to do good—to make amends for the evil of my early life."

"Ah—yes."

Sidney had become absent in his manner—Mr. Gray, who had become voluble, discoursed at great length on his peculiar principle of doing good, but Sidney heard but little of his argument, and was engrossed by thoughts of the change coming unto him again, and to which he could not offer opposition. Discoursing thus, and thinking thus, when Mattie returned, and stood in the doorway, looking from father to friend.

"Father," she ejaculated at last.

"Don't say that you are sorry to see me, after this long parting!" he exclaimed, as he rose in an excited manner, and went towards her with both hands outstretched.

"Not sorry—no—but very, very glad!"

She held his hand, and leaned forward to kiss him. He caught her to his heart then, and the tears welled into his eyes at this evidence of the past parting having been forgotten and forgiven.

"Mattie," he said, "I have been thinking of all this again—over and over again, patiently and not in anger—and I still think that it is wrong to stay here."

"And he—what does he think?" looking towards Sidney.

Sidney answered for himself.

"That, perhaps, we are both too young—blind though I am, and pure as you are, Mattie—to keep house together after this fashion. For your sake, I will ask you to go back with your father. I have been wrong and selfish."

"I said that I would go when you wished it, Mr. Sidney."

"I wish it, then!"

"Very well."

"Go—to return again very frequently with your father, and see that I am well and likely to do well. Mattie, for ever after this understand that I cannot do utterly without you. Wrong and selfish also in that wish, perhaps, but I am sure of you forgiving me!"

"Yes—yes," she said, hurriedly. "It is strange that we three should all have been thinking of going away to-day—and perhaps," with a blush, "it was scarcely right to come. But," evincing here her old rebellious spirit, with a suddenness that made her father and Sidney leap again, "if he were the same man I found here first, I would have stopped—mark that!"

"Yes, but he isn't, my dear!" said Mr. Gray, cowing into submission, and afraid of Mattie talking herself into a change of mind; "so it's all happened for the best, and we are all thankful and all friends!"

"I will be ready when you wish, then."

"I have ordered a cab to come round at twelve. You see I was sure that you would not turn against me ever again."

"I never turned against you—don't think that."

Mattie went out of the room—was a long while gone—returned with her eyes red and swollen, as though she had been weeping. The cab at the same time rattled up to the door, and Ann Packet—with red and swollen eyes also, if she could have been seen just then—was heard struggling down stairs with Mattie's box, which she had not allowed Mattie to touch.

"Go and talk to Mr. Sidney again, gal. You mayn't have another chance," she had said, and Mattie had started and glared at her as at a phantom. Surely it was time for her to go, when this faithful but dull-witted woman saw through the veil which she believed had hidden her true heart from every one on earth. But that must be fancy, she thought, and she went back to the room to bid Sidney good-bye, and to check the thanks with which he would have overwhelmed her.

"No thanks, Sir—only my duty to one whose last thoughts were of your happiness, and how it was best to promote it. *He* had faith in me, and I have endeavoured to deserve it, as though he had been watching every action of my own from Heaven. Good-bye, Mr. Sidney."

"Good-bye—best of friends. You will not desert me wholly?—your father is on my side now."

"Yes. I shall look in upon you very often, I hope—and you must keep strong, and make up your mind about that business—and—and not think yourself into that low estate ever again. Now I am ready to go."

Mattie and her father left the house the former had brightened by

ner presence. In the cab she struggled for a while with her forced composure, and then burst forth into irrepressible tears.

"Patience, Mattie. I see the end to all this. All's well."

"You see the end to this? No, you cannot!"

"Oh! yes—I can."

Mr. Gray uttered not a syllable more during the remainder of the journey; and Mattie, ashamed of her tears, dried her eyes, and asked no further questions.

CHAPTER V.

ANN PACKET EXPRESSES AN OPINION.

Sidney Hinchford knew that he should miss Mattie, and accordingly made up his mind, as he thought, to the loss. But there is no making up one's mind entirely to the absence of those we love, and upon whom we have been dependent, and Sidney found himself no exception to the rule.

In great things he had expected to miss her, but in the thousand minor ones, wherein she had reigned dominant without his knowledge, he made no calculation for, and a hundred times a day they suggested the absence of the ruling genius. The house assumed an unnatural and depressing stillness; he felt wholly shut from the world again—no one to whom he could speak, or who, in reply, could assure him that his lot was not worse than other people's, and that there lay before him many methods for its amelioration.

He became more dull and thoughtful; but he did not sink back to his past estate—that was a promise which he had made Mattie, before she went away. When she came again—he prayed it might be soon—she should not find him the despondent, morbid being, from which her efforts had transformed him. He tried to think the time away by dwelling upon that business in which he intended to embark; but there came the grave perplexity of the general management—and whom to trust, now Mattie had returned to her father's home! Meanwhile, he was wasting money by inaction, and he had always known the value of money, and money's fugitive properties, if not carefully studied.

We say that he tried to think of his new business life, for other thoughts would force their way to the front, and take pre-eminence. He could not keep the past ever in the background; before him would flit, despite his efforts to escape it, the figure of his lost love, to whom he had looked forward once as his solace in his blindness. Blindness, with her at his side, had not appeared a life to be deplored, and it was ever pleasant to picture what might have been, had the ties between them never been sundered by his will. For he loved her still—the stern interdict upon her name was even a part of his affection; and there were times when he did not care to shut her from his mind—on the contrary, loved to think of her as he had known her once. In these latter days, he thought of both Harriet and Mattie—drew, as was natural to one in his condition, the comparison between them—saw which was the truer, firmer, better character, but loved the weaker for all that! That Harriet had not loved him truly and firmly, did not matter; he had given her up for his pride's sake, even for her own sake, but he loved her none the less. She would have been unhappy with him after a while—she could not have endured the place of nurse and comforter—she, who was made for the brightness of life, and to be comforted herself when that brightness was shut from her; she was not like Mattie, a woman of rare character and energy.

Mattie troubled him. She had awakened his gratitude; the last day her father had aroused in him his fears that she had rendered herself open to the suspicions of the world by her efforts in his service—he had not thought of *that* before! Mattie's character was worth studying—it was so far apart from the common run of womankind—she had treasured every past action that stood as evidence of kindness to her, and made return for it a thousand-fold. Who would have dreamed of all this years ago, when he tracked her with the police to the Kent Street lodging-house, and was moved to pity by her earnest eyes? Hers had been a strange life; his had been exceptional—his had ended in blank monotony, that nothing could change—what was in store for her? He thought of the mistake that he had committed on the day that Harriet had personated her unwillingly, and blushed for the error of the act. He had been moved too much by gratitude, and had almost offered his blank life to Mattie, as he thought; Mattie, who would have shrunk from him like the rest, had she believed that he had had such thoughts of *her*. His blindness had affected his mind; he had grown heedless, foolish, wilful. Then his thoughts revolved to Harriet Wesden again—to the girl who had not lost her interest in him with her love, but had stolen to his solitary house, to ask about him, and to note the change in him. She had been always a generous-hearted girl—moved at any trouble, and anxious to take her part in its alleviation—there was nothing remarkable in it. He was still the old friend and playfellow, after all, and in the future days, when their engagement lay

further back from the present, he should be glad to hear her voice of sympathy again.

These thoughts, or thoughts akin to these, travelled in a circle round the blind man's brain, hour after hour, day after day. Thoughts of business, Mattie, Harriet Wesden—varied occasionally by the reminiscences of the dead father, and the relations who had sought him out, whom he had sought, and then turned away from.

Mattie and her father came to see him three days after their formal withdrawal from his home; that was a fair evening, which changed the aspect of things, and which he remembered kindly afterwards, notwithstanding a prayer of some duration, that Mr. Gray contrived to introduce. Something new to think of was always Sidney Hinchford's craving, and the day that followed any fresh incidents bore less heavily upon him, as he rehearsed those incidents in his mind.

Still they had said nothing of the business; they had been more anxious to know how he had spent his time since their departure, whether Mattie's absence had made much difference to him. Sidney spoke the truth, and Mattie was pleased at the confession. It was an evidence of the good she had done by resisting her father's will, and she was woman enough not to be sorry for the result.

That evening, Ann Packet, bringing in the supper to her master, was startled by the question which he put to her.

"How is Mattie looking, Ann?"

"Looking, Sir!"

"Has all this watching, studying my eccentricities, affected her?"

"She's a little pale, mayhap—but she has allus been pale since her last illness."

"I never gave a thought as to the effect which the constant study of a monomaniac might produce upon her," he said, half abruptly "but she's quit of me now, and will improve."

"Oh! she was well enough here—like a bird chirping about the house—Mattie likes something to do for some one. An extrornary girl, Master Sidney, as was ever sent to be a blessing unto all she took to."

"Yes—an extraordinary girl. Sit down."

"No—it isn't for the likes of me to do that here, Sir."

"Sit down, and tell me what you think of her. We don't study appearances in trouble—and a blind man loves the sound of a woman's voice."

"Then you have altered werry much, Sir."

"Yes—thanks to Mattie again."

"And to think that she was a little ragged gal about the streets, Sir. Many and many a time have I crept to the door after shop was

shut, and given her the odd pieces I could find, and she was allus grateful for 'em."

"Always grateful—who can doubt that?"

"She was waiting for the pieces when you came home and lost that brooch—poor ignorant thing, then, Sir!"

"Through you, then, Ann, we first knew Mattie Gray. Strangely things come round!"

"Ah! you don't know half her goodness, Sir—she's just as kind to anybody who wants kindness—*just*."

"Yes, it is like her!"

"It's a pity her father isn't less of a fidget—she ought to have had a better un than that, or have never lighted on him, I think."

"Is she not happy with him, then?"

"She may be, she mayn't—but he *is* a fidget, and Mattie ought to have some one to take care of her now, and make her happy—like."

"A husband, you mean?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Sit down, Ann. Perhaps you know of some one who is likely to take care of Mattie in the way you think?"

"I don't know."

"Some one who calls and sees her, and in whom she is interested?"

"Oh! no—no one calls to see *her*," said Ann. "Her father's jealous of her liking anybody save himself. I saw that long ago."

"I should like to see—ah, ha! *to see!*"—he cried—"Mattie happy. She deserves it."

"Those who think so little of theirselves seldom find happiness though—do they, Sir?"

Sidney started at the axiom—it was deeper than Ann Packet's general run of observations.

"There are so few of those good folk in the world, Ann."

"Mattie's one."

"Yes—Mattie's one!" he repeated.

"I've often wondered and a-wondered what would make her happy; do you know, Sir, sometimes I think that—that *you* might if you'll excuse an ignorant woman saying so."

"That I might!—what has made you think that? Sit down—why *don't* you sit down!"

"Well, just to talk this over, and for my darling's sake, I will for once demean myself;" and Ann Packet, red in the face with excitement, seated herself on the verge of the horsehair chair.

Ann Packet had broken through the ice at last; it had been a trouble of long duration; she who knew Mattie's secret, guessed where Mattie's chance of happiness rested, she thought. But it is

delicate work to strive for the happiness of other people, and leads to woful failures, as a rule.

Ann Packet was nervous; the plunge had been made, and the truth must escape—she dashed into the subject for "her gal's sake."

"Lookee here, Sir—it's no good my keeping back my 'pinion that our Mattie is really fond of you! When she was a girl in Suffolk Street, and you a bit of a boy, she used to worry me about you, and yet I never guessed it! When she growed bigger and you growed bigger, she showed her liking less, but it peeped out at times unbeknown to herself, and yet I never guessed it. But when she was ill in Tenchester Street, and I left here to nus her, the truth came on me all of a heap, and 'mazed me dreffuI!"

"What made you think of this—this nonsense, then?" he asked.

"She spoke about you in her fever, when her head was gone," said Ann; "of how your happiness hadn't come, and yet she'd worked so hard for it. And somehow I guessed it then—and when she came here, and was, for the fust time, happy in her way—I knowed it!"

"Folly! folly!" murmured Sidney.

"And they who says that she had no right to come here, don't know the rights of things—she liked you best of all, Sir, and she comes here, duty bound, to do her best. If they says a word against her in MY hearing for her coming here, let 'em look out, that's all!"

Sidney sat, with his fingers interlaced, thoughtful and grave.

"You may go now, Ann—I'm sorry that you have put this into my head. It can't be true."

"True or not, just ask her some day when you feel that you can't do without her help, and see who's wrong of us two. And you'll have to ask her, mind that!"

Ann rose and bustled towards the door. At the door a new form of argument suggested itself, and she came back again.

"You're blind enough not to care for good looks so much now—if you can get a good heart, think yourself lucky, Sir. You've just the chance of making one woman happy in your life, and in finding your life very different to what it is now, with a blundering gal like me to worry you. She won't think any the wus of you for being blind and helpless—she's much too good for you!"

"Well, that's true enough, Ann."

"I don't say that I'm saying this for your sake, young man," said Ann Packet, in quite a maternal manner, "for you're no great catch to anybody, and will be a sight of trouble. But I do think that Mattie took a fancy to you ever so long ago, and that it didn't die away like other people's because you came to grief. And if my opinion has discumfrumpled you more than I expected, why, you asked for it, and I haven't many words to pick and choose from, when I've made up my mind to speak. And I'm not sorry now that I've spoke it, anyways."

"I fear Mattie would not thank you, Ann."

"Mattie never knowed what was good for herself so well as for t'other people—I looks after her good like her mother—I don't know that any one else would. And though I'm your servant, I'm her friend—and so I asks you, if you've any intentions, to speak out like a gentleman!"

Still suffering from nervous excitement, Ann Packet closed the door, and ran down stairs to indulge in an hysterical kind of croaking, with her head in the dresser-drawer. It had been a great effort, but Ann had succeeded in it. Her young master knew the whole truth now, and there was no excuse for him. He must give up Mattie or marry her, she thought—either way her girl would not be "worrited" out of her life any longer!

Meanwhile the young master left his supper untouched, and dwelt upon the revelation. Something new to think of!—something to stir afresh the sluggish current of his life.

Was it true?—was it likely?—was it to be helped, if true or likely? Could it be possible that it lay in his power to promote the happiness of any living being still. Could he make happy, above all, the girl whom he had known so long, and who had served him so faithfully? He did not think of himself, or ask if it were possible to love her; possibly for the first time in his life, he was wholly unselfish, and thought only of a return for all the sacrifices *she* had made. He could remember now that hers had been a life of abnegation—that she had risked her good name once for Harriet Wesden—once, in the latter days, for himself. All this simply Mattie's gratitude for the kindness extended in the old days—nothing more. It was not likely that that ignorant woman below could know all that had been unfathomable to brighter, keener intellects.

But if true, what better act on his part than to gladden her heart, and add to the content of his own? He began a new existence with his loss of sight—the old world vanished away completely, and left him but one friend from it—let him not lose that one by his perversity or pride. Still, let him do nothing hastily and shame both him and her. He would wait!

CHAPTER VI.

MR. GRAY'S SCHEME.

Mr. Gray and his daughter Mattie re-commenced housekeeping together on a different principle. Mattie's flitting had impressed Mr. Gray with the consciousness of his daughter possessing a will a trifle more inflexible than his own, and he respected her opinions in consequence. He treated her less like a child, and more like a woman whose remarks were worth listening to. In plain truth, he had become a little afraid of Mattie. He had learned to love her, and was afraid of losing her. Her stern determination to keep her promise—even part with him, rather than break it—had won his respect; for he was a firm man himself, and in his heart admired firmness in others.

Father and daughter settled down to home matters, and worked together in many things; if the daughter had one secret from her father, it was the woman's natural aversion to confess to an attachment not likely to be returned, and was scarcely a secret, considering that Mr. Gray had more than an inkling of the truth.

The father did not care to solve the problem that was so easy of solution; he objected to showing any interest in such trivial mundane matters as love-making. He had a soul himself above love-making; which he considered vain, frivolous, and worldly, leading the thoughts astray from things divine. He saw Mattie's perplexity, and even hoped in the good time to alter it, if separation did not have its proper effect. "Presently—we shall see," was Mr. Gray's motto; and though he had spoken hopefully to Mattie, as Mattie had fancied, yet when they were at home again—two prosaic home figures—he kept the subject in the background.

Still he was watchful, and when Mattie began to alter, to become more grave and downcast, as though his home was not exactly the place where she experienced happiness—when she brightened up at any suggestion to visit Sidney Hinchford, he thought less of his own comfort, and more of his daughter's, like a good father as he was, after all.

One afternoon, without apprising that daughter of his intentions, he walked over to Camberwell, to see Sidney Hinchford. That young gentleman had ventured forth into the street, and therefore Mr. Gray had leisure to put things in order during his absence; arrange the mantelpiece, and wheel the table into the exact centre

of the room. Anything out of order always put him in an ill temper, and he wanted to discuss business matters in an equable way, and with as little to disturb him as possible. If anything besides business leaked forth in the course of conversation, he should not be sorry; but he would take no mean advantage of Sidney Hinchford's position. He had a scheme to propose, which might be accepted or declined; what that scheme might end in, he would not say just then. It might end in his daughter marrying Sidney, or it might only tend to that singular young man's comfort and peace of mind—at all events, harm could not evolve from it, and possibly some personal advantage to himself, though he considered that *that* need not be taken into account.

Sidney Hinchford returned, and his face lit up at the brisk "Good afternoon" of Mr. Gray. He turned a little aside from him, as if expecting a smaller, softer hand in his, a voice more musical, asking if he were well, and then his face lost a great deal of its brightness with his disappointment.

"Alone?" he said.

"This time, Mattie is very busy—has a large dress-making order to fulfil."

"She'll kill herself with that needlework," he remarked; "it is a miserable profession, at the best."

"You're quite right, Mr. Sidney. And talking about professions, have you thought of yours lately?"

"Oh! I have thought of a hundred things. I must invest my capital—such as it is—in something."

"Will you listen patiently to a little plan of mine? I am of the world, worldly to-day, God forgive me!" he ejaculated, piously.

"What plan is that? Let us sit down and talk it over."

The local preacher, lithographer, &c., sat down facing Sidney, on whose face was visible an expression of keen interest. In matters of religion, Mr. Gray was long and prosy; in matters of business, quick and terse, a man after Sidney's own heart. Two "straightforward" men like them got through a deal of business in a little time.

"How much money have you at command?"

"A hundred pounds, perhaps."

"So have I."

"What's that to do with it?"

"A great deal, if you like my scheme; nothing, if you don't."

"Go on."

"A hundred pounds might start a business, but it's a risk; two hundred is better. How does Gray and Hinchford sound, now?"

"A partnership?"

"Why not? You're not fit to manage a business by yourself; I'm inclined to think the two of us might make a success of it; the three of us, if Mattie has to assist. I don't see why we should go

on like this any longer; you can't stand at this rent; one house may as well hold all of us, why not?"

"You are very kind. I shall be a great trouble to you."

"I hope not. If you are, I like trouble. I shall make a bright light of you in good time!"

Sidney thought of the sermons in store for him, but hazarded no comment. Beyond them, and before all, was the preacher's daughter —the woman who understood him, and who had even rendered blindness endurable.

"You were speaking a short while since of going abroad. Have you changed your mind?"

"They changed theirs at the chapel. Bless you! they thought they could pitch upon a man so much more suitable! You hear that—so much more suitable!"

"Ah! a good joke."

"I don't see where the joke lies," he said quickly.

"I beg pardon. No, not exactly a joke—was it?"

"I should say not."

"Well—and this business—what is it to be?"

"I fancy the old idea of a bookseller and stationer's. I can bring a little connection from our chapel together; and there's your friends at the bank."

"No; don't build on them; I have done with them."

"Ah! I had forgotten. But we must not bear enmity in our hearts against our fellow-men."

"True—and this business—where is it to be?"

"We'll look out, Mattie and I, at once."

"Nothing settled yet, then?" said Sidney, with a sigh, who was anxious to be stirring in life once more.

"Nothing yet, of course. I did not know whether you would approve of the scheme. Whether Mattie and I would be exactly fitting company for you."

"Is that satire?"

"My dear Sir, I never said a satirical thing in my life."

"The best of company, then; for you and Mattie are the only friends left me, save that honest girl down stairs."

"Ah! Ann Packet; we must not forget her, or we shall have Mattie scolding us."

"I asked if it were satire, because you are doing me a great service, and saving me from much anxiety. I have been thinking lately that it would be better for me to find my way into some asylum or other, and settle down there apart from the busy world without. You come forward to save me from the streets I have been fearing."

"As Mattie was saved," said Mr. Gray, solemnly; "remember that!"

Mr. Gray shortly afterwards took his leave. The same night he communicated the details of his scheme to his daughter; he could

easily read in her face that it was a plan that had her full concurrence. Sidney at home again—Sidney to take care of, and screen from all those ills to which his position was liable!

In a short while, a shop in the suburbs of London—not a great distance from Peckham Rye—was found to let. It stood in a new neighbourhood with houses rising round it at every turn. A building mania had set in that direction, and a populous district was springing up there.

"I have always heard that to pitch one's camp in a new neighbourhood, if one has the patience to wait, will always succeed. We three have patience, and I think we'll try it."

This was said to Mattie, after she and her father had inspected the premises, and were walking by cross roads towards Camberwell, to gladden Sidney with the latest news.

"We'll try it; we'll begin home there, father."

"Home in earnest—eh?"

Mattie did not notice the meaning in his tones; she was full of other thoughts.

"It must be a home, that you and I will try to render happy for him—for his own sake—for his dead father's," she said.

"To be sure. And if he be not happy then, it will not be our fault."

"I hope not."

"Hope not," said her father; "do you think that we may fail in the attempt?"

"If we be not careful. We must remember that he is weak and requires support—that he is blind, and cannot escape us if we weary him too much."

"Oh! I see—I see," he said, a little aggrieved; "you are afraid that I shall tire him with the Word of God. Mattie, he's not exactly a Christian man yet, and I should certainly like to make him one. There will be plenty of time for preaching the truth unto him."

"And for leaving it alone."

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated, as though Mattie had fired a pistol in his ear.

"You will believe that I understand him best, and that I think that it will not do to attack him too often with our creed. His first disappointment is over; he is teaching himself resignation; he will come round to a great extent without our help! with our help, judiciously applied, he will come round altogether."

"You think a man may be told too often of the error of his ways?"

"Yes."

"Then we shall never agree upon that point."

And they never did. Notwithstanding this, Mr. Gray remembered Mattie's hint, and often curbed a rising attempt to preach to Sidney. When his rigour carried him to preaching point

Sidney listened patiently; when Sidney knew that Mr. Gray's energy was real, and that not one atom of hypocrisy actuated his motives, he respected the preacher, and paid attention to him.

He altered rapidly for the better; he became again almost the Sidney Hinchford of old times—the smile returned more frequently, the brightness of his face was something new; it was pleasant to think that he was not isolated from the world, and that there were friends in it yet to care for him.

He went to church every Sunday in lieu of chapel, somewhat to Mr. Gray's dissatisfaction. He had gone in old days twice every Sunday with his father, and he preferred adopting the old habits to frequenting the chapel whither Mr. Gray desired to conduct him. Sometimes Mattie accompanied him; more often, when he knew his ground, he went by himself, leaving Mattie to her father's escort.

Meanwhile, business slowly but surely increased; the connection extended; all went well with these three watchers, each watching for a different purpose, with an equal degree of earnestness.

END OF BOOK THE SIXTH.

BOOK VII.

SIDNEY'S GRATITUDE.

CHAPTER I.

MAURICE HINCHFORD IN SEARCH OF HIS COUSIN.

NEARLY a year had passed away since the firm of Hinchford and Gray started in business and astonished the suburbs. In search of that rising firm, a young man, fresh from foreign travel, was wandering in the outskirts of Peckham one February night. A man who had crossed deserts, climbed mountains, and threaded mountain passes with comparative ease, but who was quickly lost in the brick and mortar wilderness into which he had ventured.

This man, we may say at once, was Maurice Hinchford, a man who had seen life and spent a fortune in an attempt to enjoy it. A Sybarite, who had wandered from place to place, from kingdom to kingdom, until even novelty had palled upon him, and he had returned back to his father and his father's business. During this long holiday he had thought much of his cousin Sidney, the man to whom he had taken no passing fancy, and whose life he had helped to blight—whom, by way of atonement, he had once wished to advance in the world.

Sidney Hinchford had been constantly before him during his pilgrimage; before him that indignant figure which had repelled all excuse, on the night he reached his one and thirtieth year; he could see it hastening away in the night shadows from the house to which it had been unsuspiciously lured.

On his return, not before, for he had wandered from place to

place, and many letters had miscarried—amongst them the missive which had told him of his uncle's death and cousin's blindness—he heard of the calamity which had befallen Sidney in his absence.

He had been ever a feeling man, and forgetting the past rebuff he had received—thinking, perhaps, that his cousin was in distress, he started at once in search of him. To do Maurice Hinchford justice, it was on the very day on which he had reached London, and before he had seen his mother and sisters. No assurance of his father that Sidney was in good hands contented him; he must judge for himself. He had the Hinchford impetus to proceed at once straightforwardly to work; he was a man who was sorry for the harm he had done in his life—one of those comfortable souls, who are always sorry *afterwards!*—a loose liver, with a conscience that would not keep quiet and let events flow on smoothly by him. He had sobered down during his travels, too; he had met with many acquaintances, but no friends—in all his life he had not found one true friend who would have stood by him in adversity, and shared his troubles, even his purse, with him.

Fortunately Maurice Hinchford had not known adversity, and had shared his purse with others instead. A rich man, an extravagant one, but a man of observation, who knew tinsel from pure gold, and sighed very often when he found himself compelled, perforce, to put up with the tinsel. Life such as his had wearied him of late; men of his own class had sworn eternal amity, and then laughed at him when his back was turned; men of a grade inferior had toadied him, cringed to him, sponged upon him; women had flattered him for his wealth's sake, not loved him for his own—all had acknowledged him one of those good fellows, of which society is always proud; but for *himself* nobody cared save his own flesh and blood—he could read that fact well enough, and its constant reiteration on the faces of "his set" annoyed him more than he could have believed.

This favourite of fortune, then, annoyed with society's behaviour, had started forth in search of Sidney an hour after the news was learned from his father's lips. He had a great deal to say to Sidney; he had not entered into any explanations in that letter which Sidney had coolly responded to—he could say more *viva voce;* and now the storm was more than a year old, his cousin would surely put up with more, and listen to him.

But firstly, Maurice Hinchford had to find his cousin; and having wandered from the right track, it became a matter of some difficulty. He had strayed into a "new neighbourhood"—a place always famous for its intricacies—and he floundered about new streets, and half-finished streets, asking manifold questions of the aborigines, and receiving manifold directions, which he followed implicitly, and got lost anew in consequence.

The stragglers were few and far between, and Maurice waited patiently for the next arrival—standing under a lamp-post at the

corner of a street. He had given up all hope in his own resources, and had resolved to enlist the next nondescript in his service, be his terms whatever his rapacity dictated. But the next nondescript was a woman, and he was baffled again. A young woman in a great hurry, to whom he could not offer money, and whose progress he scarcely liked to arrest, until the horror of another vigil under that melancholy gas-lamp overcame his reluctance to intrude.

"I beg pardon," he said, hastily; "I am looking for Park Place. Will you oblige me, Miss, by indicating in which direction it may lie *now?*"

"As straight as you can go, Sir."

"Ah! but, confound it, I can't go straight. Not that I'm intoxicated," he said quickly, seeing his auditor recoil, and make preparations for a hasty retreat, "but these streets are incomprehensibly tortuous."

The listener seemed to look very intently towards him for an instant. The voice appeared to strike her.

"Whom do you want in Park Place?" was the quick answer.

"A Mr. Hinchford, of the business of Gray and Hinchford."

"You are his cousin Maurice?"

"By George!—yes. How did you know that?"

"I guessed it—that's all."

"You are a shrewd guesser, Miss," he said. "Yes, I am his cousin Maurice, and you are——"

"Mattie Gray, his partner's daughter."

"Oh! indeed!"

"I have seen you once before—you brought your father, some years ago, to a stationer's shop in Great Suffolk Street."

"Right—a retentive memory."

"I seldom forget faces—it is not likely that I should have forgotten yours."

"Why not?"

"I have heard so much of you since then," was the answer, cold and cutting as the east wind that was swooping down the street that night.

"Oh! have you?"

Maurice walked on by her side; after a few moments Mattie said to him,

"What do *you* want with Sidney?"

"Many things. I am anxious to see him—very anxious."

"Your presence can but give him pain—why expose him to needless suffering by this intrusion?"

"I have a hope that it will not be considered an intrusion, Miss Gray," said Maurice, stiffly.

"I can see no reason why you should hope that."

"I am his relation—his——"

"Sir, I know what you are," said Mattie, sharply; "I know all

your history, and all the harm you have done to him, and Harriet Wesden and me."

"And you!—*and you*, Miss!" he repeated harshly.

"An evil action spreads evil in its turn, and there is no knowing where it may end, Mr. Hinchford," said Mattie; "yours affected my character."

"I don't see that—how was that possible?"

"Whilst you were playing your villain's trick on Harriet Wesden, I was searching the streets for her. I kept her secret after her return, and, therefore, could not give my employer a fitting reason for my absence from the business left in trust to me. I was discharged."

"I am very sorry," said Maurice, energetically; "upon my soul, I had no idea of all the harm my folly—my villainy, if you will—had caused till now! Miss Gray, you don't know how sorry I am!"

"I don't care."

"Is that merciful or womanly?"

"Perhaps not. But I will believe that you are sorry, if you will not accompany me further."

"Miss Gray, I must come. More than ever, I am resolved to see him to-night."

"Very well."

They went on together, both walking at a brisk pace, Maurice a little discomfited, and with his head bent down and his hands behind him.

"May I ask," he said after some moments' silence, "if he be well?"

"He is well."

"Blind still?"

"Yes."

"May I ask you, as his friend, let me say, if his means be adequate to his support?"

"Ah! you have come to ask him that—to see that for yourself?"

"Not exactly—it is one of many reasons."

"Keep that from him, then," cried Mattie; "spare him that humiliation."

"Why humiliation, Miss?"

"It is humiliation, it is an insult, to offer help to the man whose life you have embittered. You that have known Sidney, worked with him in your office, professed to be his friend, should have fathomed that part of his character, at least, which is based upon his pride. Sir, I doubt if he esteem you very much, but he will certainly hate you if you talk of money."

"Then I'll not talk of it."

"And you'll not go back?"

"I never go back," said Maurice; "I'm a Hinchford."

"All the Hinchfords whom I have known have been honest, earnest men, striving to do good, and detesting cunning and disguise. I hope that you are the first that has disgraced the name."

"I hope so. Phew! how hot it is!"

Maurice Hinchford felt exceedingly uncomfortable under these continued attacks; still there was a novelty in all this dispraise and plain-speaking. A brusque young woman this, whose character interested him, and whose warmth in his cousin's service he respected, despite the darts with which she transfixed him.

He did not flinch from the purpose he had formed, however. He *was* anxious to see his cousin, to receive the attack in full, and defend himself; to prove to Sidney if it were possible, that he was not quite the unprincipled villain that was generally supposed. So he kept on his way, and this first little dash of the waters of opposition against him did not affect him much. Mattie's energetic advice puzzled him, certainly; she spoke warmly in Sidney's cause —as if she were interested in him, and had a right to take his part —was there any reason for that brisk attack upon him, save her own outraged dignity at the slander which, by his means, had indirectly fallen upon her? He kept pace with her but did not speak again. She was not inclined to reply with any "graciousness" to his questions; he saw that he had annoyed her already by the object of his mission, and that it was the better policy, the truer act of courtesy, to maintain a rigid silence.

Mattie spoke first.

"This is the house," she said, stopping before a shop already closed for the night. "You are still of the same mind?"

"Yes."

"You cannot do good here—you may do harm."

"Your pardon, but I am of a different opinion."

"Very well, then."

Mattie gave a little impetuous tug to the bell; Ann Packet opened the door, and Mattie and her unwilling escort passed into the shop, the latter the object of immense attraction from the round-eyed, open-mouthed serving-maid. Events flowed on so regularly and monotonously in that quarter of the world, that the advent of a tall, well-dressed stranger, was a thing to be remarked, and, Ann Packet hoped, to be explained.

Mattie ran at once into the parlour, where her father was sitting over his work. He looked up with a bright smile as she entered.

"Where's Sidney, father?"

"In his own room."

"Here is his cousin. Sidney must be prepared to see him, or to deny himself to him."

"What cousin is that?" Mr. Gray asked a little irrelevantly, being taken aback by the news.

Mattie explained, and ran up stairs. Mr. Gray pushed aside the stone upon which he had been writing, turned up his coat-cuffs, and buttoned his black coat to the chin. He knew the story in which that cousin had played his part perfectly well; had he forgotten it, his remembrance of old faces would not have betrayed him in this instance. Here was the man to whom he had administered a fugitive lecture in the dead of night at Ashford railway station, once more before him; here was a chance of touching the heart of a most incorrigible sinner—a sinner worthy of *his* powers of conversion. He would tackle him at once; he would warn him of the errors of his ways, and of the infallible results of them, if he did not listen to the warning voice. He was just in the mood for delivering a sermon, and there was no time like the present. Now for it!

Mr. Gray turned the handle of the parlour door and skipped into the shop.

CHAPTER II.

MAURICE RECEIVES PLENTY OF ADVICE.

Maurice Hinchford had been told by Mattie to wait in the shop until she returned; and, obedient to her mandate, he had taken his seat on a very tall, uncomfortable stool, on which he could have remained perched more at his ease had a balance-pole been provided. Here he had remained, looking round the shop, and taking stock of its manifold contents—glancing askance now and then at Ann Packet, whose curiosity was not entirely satiated until Mr. Gray intruded on the scene.

At the first click of the door-handle, Maurice looked round expecting to see his cousin, but was disappointed by the presence of a small and agile man in black, who leaped on to a second chair beside him, and commenced nodding his head vigorously.

"Good evening, Sir," said Maurice. "Mr. Gray, I presume?"

"We have met before, Sir—my name *is* Gray."

"Really!—I do not remember——"

"Possibly not, Sir; there are many unpleasant reminiscences we are always glad to escape from," said Mr. Gray. "I am connected with one. You and I met on the platform of the Ashford railway station, one winter's night, when Miss Wesden claimed my protection from a snare that had been laid for her."

"Oh!"

Maurice had dropped into a hornet's nest. Whom next was he to confront before his cousin Sidney came upon the scene?—from whom else was he to hear a sharp criticism on those actions of the past, which no one regretted more than he. Luck was against him that night.

"You remember me?" said Mr. Gray. "Before the train departed I gave you a little counsel for your future course in life—a warning as to whither a persistence in your evil habits would lead you—you remember?"

"Oh! yes—I remember."

"Have you taken that warning to heart?—I fear not. Have you been any wiser, better, or more honest from that day?—I fear not. Have you not rather proceeded on your evil course, despising the preaching of good men, the warning of God's Word, and gone on, on—down, down, without a thought of the day when all your actions in this life would have to be accounted for?"

Bang came Mr. Gray's hard hand on the counter, startling Maurice Hinchford's nerves somewhat, and causing innumerable articles in the glass cases thereon to jump spasmodically with the shock.

"I—" began Maurice.

"Don't interrupt me, Sir—I will not be interrupted!—you have come hither of your own free will, seeking us out, and fearing not the evidence of our displeasure, and now, Sir, you must hear what is wrong in your acts, and what will be good for your soul. Do you know, oh! sinner, that that soul is in deadly peril?"

"I know—"

"Sir, I will not be interrupted!" cried Mr. Gray again. "I am not accustomed to be interrupted when I am endeavouring to awaken a hardened conscience to a sense of its condition, and I will not be now. And I call upon you at this time—now is the accepted time, Sir, now is the day of salvation—to amend, amend, amend! You have been a spendthrift, profligate, everything that is bad; you have studied yourself in every action of life, and neglected the common duties due to your neighbour as well as to your Maker. You have gone on smiling in your sinful course, heeding not the outcry of religious men against your hideous career, recking not of the abyss into which you must plunge, and on the brink of which, you—a man, with an immortal soul committed to your charge—are standing now! One step more, perhaps, one wilful step forward, and you are lost for

ever. *Lost!*" he shouted, with the frenzy of a fanatic, as well as the vehemence of a good man carried away by his subject! and the shrill cry made the glasses round the gas lamps ring again, and vibrated unpleasantly through Maurice's system. This was becoming unendurable.

"If you will allow me—" began Maurice.

"Sir, I will not be interrupted!" shouted Mr. Gray, with more hammering upon the counter; "I know what is good for you, and I insist upon a patient hearing. You are a man in danger of destruction, and I cannot let you go blindfold into danger, without bidding you stop whilst time is mercifully before you. Let me divide the subject, in the first place, into three heads."

Maurice groaned inwardly, and stared at the preacher. There was no help for it; there was no escape. He might jump to the floor and fly for his life; or he might tip up Mr. Gray's chair, upset that gentleman, and then gag him; but neither method would bring him nearer to that purpose for which he had ventured thither; and until Sidney appeared there was nothing to do but sit patiently under the infliction and listen to the full particulars of his dangerous state. He put his hands on his knees, surveyed the speaker, and submitted; in all his life he had never heard such a bad opinion of himself, or listened to so sweeping a condemnation of all his little infirmities. Mr. Gray ran on with great volubility, pitching his voice unpleasantly high; Maurice's blood curdled, once he was sure his hair rose upon his head, and more than once cold water running down the curve of his back bone could not have more forcibly expressed the sensations of the moment. And then those horrid bangs upon the counter—always coming when least expected, and going off like cannon shots in his ears; and the gesticulatory flourishes, and the falsetto notes when more than usually excited, and, above all, the unceasing flow of invective and persuasion—an unintermittent shower-bath of the best advice, powerful enough to swamp a congregation.

Maurice's head ached; his eyes watered; the shop grew dizzy; the books and prints revolved slowly round him, the ceiling might be the floor, and the floor the ceiling, with the gas branch screwed upside down in it, for what he knew of the matter; he lost the thread of the discourse, and found the heads thereof inextricably confused; he understood that he was a miserable sinner—the worst of sinners—or he should not be sitting there with all those horrible noises in his ears; the figure in the chair before him heaved up and down, moved its arms right and left, possibly threw double summersaults; it was all over with the listener—he was going silly, he scarcely knew now with what object he had come thither—oh! his head—oh! this never-ending, awfully rapid Niagara of words!

He made one feeble effort at resistance.

"Look here, old fellow—if you'll let me off—I'll—I'll build a tabernacle," he burst forth; and again that terrible "Sir, I will not be interrupted!" stopped all further intrusion upon the subject of discourse.

Mr. Gray was delighted with that subject, with that listener—one of the finest specimens of iniquity he had encountered for many years!—and he did not think of stopping yet awhile. Where was the hurry?—time, although valuable, could not be better spent than on that occasion—his heart was in the task he had set himself, and he would do his very best!

Mattie came to the rescue at last; she had been watching the delivery of the sermon for some time over the parlour blind, informing Sidney, who had entered the parlour, of the energy of the father, and the patient endurance of his cousin.

Disturbed as he had been by his cousin's arrival, and undecided for some time as to the expediency of granting him an interview or not, Sid could not refrain from a smile at Maurice's unenviable position. He remembered Mr. Gray's first charge upon his sins, and the unsparing length to which he had extended his remarks upon them; he could imagine the position of Maurice Hinchford at that juncture, and realise the feelings with which that gentleman heard and suffered.

"I think I'll go to him now, Sidney," said Mattie.

It had been Sidney and Mattie—as between brother and sister—for a long time now.

"Will your father admire the intrusion?" asked Sid, drily.

"Perhaps he *is* doing good," said Mattie, who regarded matters akin to this more seriously than the blind man; "I'll wait a while."

And all this time Maurice was praying for help. It had not been a very pleasant idea, that of facing his cousin for the first time; but now the thought occurred to him that he would rather face the very worst—even that obnoxious being, of whom the preacher earnestly warned him—than hear this man inveigh against his sins any more.

Mattie quietly entered the shop. The spell was broken. Mr. Gray paused with his right arm above his head—he was just coming down with another bang on the counter—and Maurice leaped off his stool, to which he had been transfixed, and shook hands violently with Mattie in his bewilderment.

"He will see me, Miss Gray?"

"Yes. If you wish it."

"Thank you—thank you! Is he in the parlour?"

"Yes."

"And so be warned, young man—there is no excuse left you—not one, now. You have been warned of all the evils which a guilty life incurs upon those who go on their way defiantly!"

"Oh! yes—I have been warned, Sir; there's not a doubt of it —I'm afraid I have put you to a great deal of trouble?" said Maurice, not yet recovered from his confusion.

"In a good cause, I don't mind trouble."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure. In the parlour, you said, Miss Gray?—then I'll go to him at once. It must be getting very late."

Mr. Gray was proceeding to follow Maurice, when Mattie touched him on the arm and arrested his progress.

"I think we had better leave them together. Their business is scarcely ours."

"What?—ah! exactly so, my dear. But I wish you had not interrupted me quite so unceremoniously—the impression I was making upon that young man was wonderful! Great Heaven! if it is left for me to work his regeneration at the last, how proud I shall be! Mattie, I think I have moved him—he has already said something about building a tabernacle, a chapel, or something; but I scarcely caught the words at the moment—think of that man, so wicked, and perverse, and designing, prodeeding after all, in the straight and narrow way! It's wonderful!"

In the meantime, Maurice Hinchford had entered the parlour, closed the door behind him, and advanced towards the figure at the table, sitting in the full light of the gas above his head. Maurice paused and looked at him.

Sidney had changed; he was looking older; there was a thread or two of silver in the dark waving hair; and the eyes, which blindness had not dimmed, had that melancholy vagueness of expression, by which such eyes are always characterised.

"Well, Sidney—I am here at last."

"I am sorry that you have taken the trouble to call."

"Indeed!—why?"

"I think you and I are best apart. We know each other far too well, by this time."

"Have patience with me, Sidney. I think not."

He drew a chair nearer his cousin, and sat down. He had not offered to shake hands with Sidney; he felt that his cousin would have resented that attempt; that he was regarded as a man who had done a grievous wrong, and from whom no professions of friendship or cousinly regard would be received. He had come with a faint hope of doing good—in some way or other, he scarcely knew himself; of extenuating in some way—almost as indefinite to him—the past conduct which had placed him in so sinister a light.

"Sidney," he said, "I wish that you had accepted that invitation to meet me which I made you. I could have explained much."

"No explanation, Maurice, would have been satisfactory to me at that time."

"Will it be now, then?" he asked, eagerly catching at the words which implied possibly more than his cousin had wished to convey.

"I would prefer dismissing the subject altogether," Sid replied. "If you will tell me candidly and honestly that you are sorry for the past, I will be glad to hear it, and believe it."

"You bear me no malice, then?"

"No; I have outlived it."

"Then you will——"

"I will do nothing, but remain with those good friends who have taken pity on my helplessness," he said, sternly.

"Sidney, pray understand me. I don't wish you to think me a wholly bad man—God knows I am not that—I have never been that. I have had bad friends, evil counsellors, if you will; mine was never a resolute nature, but one easily led away from the first. I was an only son, spoiled by an indulgent father, spoiled by the money which was lavished on me, spoiled by the crowd which the spending of that money brought about me—nothing more."

"That is bad enough," said Sid.

"I own that. I own that I was flattered to my moral ruin, Sidney; that they, who called themselves my friends, cheered on that downfall, and made it easy to me, scoffing at all worlds purer than their own. I was young, vain, impressionable, and far from high-principled when I first met Harriet Wesden at Brighton."

"I would rather not hear the story," said Sidney, uneasily.

Maurice paid no heed to the remark, but went on hastily; and Sidney, suppressing his intention to arrest the narrative, sat still and listened to its weaknesses, its mystery, and yet its truth.

"Harriet Wesden was a romantic school-girl—a young woman who knew little of life, or had read the fictions, highly-coloured, concerning it, till she might have belonged to dream-land for the realities about her. She was led away by a senior scholar, too, as romantic as herself, and more designing; and she and I met, talked, corresponded—fell in love with each other."

"I deny that."

"Patience, Sidney; on my soul we did! I was not a villain, but a man led away by my vanity and this girl's preference for me, and I loved her. I don't say that it was a very true or passionate love; but it *was* a love, which burned fiercely enough for a time—which would have been purer and better, but for the evil counsellor and false friend who was always with me, to treat life, and love, and honour as a jest."

"The man I met at your house?"

"No. A man who has died since then—thank God, I was almost adding, for he worked me much evil, and death only freed me from him."

"Go on."

"When Harriet Wesden and I parted, I believe we truly loved each other. I had assumed a false name at the outset, and had maintained it throughout our strange courtship, fearing the discovery of governesses, and not knowing the character of her to whom my folly had lured me. I was to go abroad at my father's wish, and I left, fully resolving to write to her, and own all, and ask her if she would wait for me. Then came long absence, fresh scenes, new friends, new dissipations, a belief that she would easily forget me, being but a child when I had seen her last; and so the old, old story, varied scarcely from the many that have gone before it. Sidney, she did forget me—did discover that, after all, it was but a fleeting fancy of her own."

"No."

"I think the next part of my story proves that. I met her again after an absence of a few years, in the streets, near her house in Suffolk Street, whither I had conducted my father to see yours. All my old passion for her revived—but it was a struggle with her to endure my presence at first. Still I was from the old days; I revived in her memory the one romance that had been hers; I had not played a false part therein, and could easily excuse my long silence. I found out the friends whom she visited in the neighbourhood of New Cross; I formed their acquaintance, and met Harriet Wesden more frequently. Her old assertion that she never wished to see me again—that she loved another, whose name she would never confess to me—wavered. I saw it, and, carried away by the impression created, I did my best to win her."

"Away from me?—well, you succeeded. She wrote to me at that time, confessing her inability to think of me longer as a lover."

"She wrote, not knowing her own mind, I believe. At that time she was disturbed in thought concerning us—she was often cold and repellent to me, and it was difficult to understand her. Well, Sid, throughout all this, I loved her."

"Why keep to your false name, then?"

"I was ready to confess the truth, at every interview; then I put off the avowal, after my old fashion. I knew by that time that your father and yourself were lodging at the stationer's shop, and I formed a shrewd guess as to the rival I had in her affections. Finally, Sid, there came that night at New Cross, when she was carried away to Ashford. As I hope to be saved, I had no design against her then; in good faith, I was her escort to the railway station; it was only as we approached that station that the *ruse* suggested itself—that the devil whispered in my ear his temptation. I knew the time of the mail-train; I had been by it *en route* to Paris only a few weeks since; I led her along, unsuspecting of evil, to the other side of the railway station. She was with me in the carriage before I became conscious of the heinousness of the act I had committed. Even then I intended her no harm; I trusted all to circumstance; I was even pre-

pared to marry her, rather than lose her; I was under a spell, Sidney!"

"Yes—the spell of the devil."

"When she discovered the truth, I found that I had secured her hate, rather than her love; at Ashford station she faced me like a tigress, and, full of the honest indignation that possessed her, held me up to the shame I deserved before a host of people—pointed me out as a coward and knave who had sought to cruelly deceive her. She claimed the protection of that—that terrible man in the shop there—he was at Ashford as you know—and I was glad to hide my head in the railway carriage, and be borne away from his withering contempt. That's the story. I will not tell you of the sorrow which I experienced for the harm that I had done her—of the shame that has remained with me since then—of the turn which she even gave to my character. Sidney, I would have made any reparation in my power, but I was baffled and degraded, and dared not look upon her any more."

'That man I met at your house; he knew the story?"

"He knew the beginning of it; and for Harriet Wesden's sake—and to redeem her character in the mind of a man who has not a high estimate of women—I told the end."

Sidney sat and thought for a while. Then he pronounced his verdict. "All this assures me that you are easily led away—that it is only chance that has kept you from being wholly a bad man. You are weak, vacillating, and unprincipled—you are no Hinchford."

"I have tried to do my best all my life, but somehow failed," said Maurice, ruefully; "impulse has led me wrong when my heart has meant right—candidly, cousin, I have been a fool more than once. But you cannot believe that I would do harm to any human being in cold blood?"

"Possibly not. But what virtue is there in that?"

"Let me add, Sidney, that I honestly believe that I have been altering for the better for the last two years. I have seen the emptiness of all my friends' professions; their greed of gain and love of self; have turned heart-sick at their evil-speaking, lying, and slandering. I feel that I haven't a friend; that I have 'used up' all the pleasures in the world, and that there is no thing I care for in it."

"Yours is a bad state, that leads to worse, as a rule, Maurice."

"I know it—I feel it."

"And you are truly sorry for all the harm that you have done us in life—Harriet, I, and others?"

"With all my heart—truly sorry."

"I can forgive you, then. I have been taught by good friends to be more charitable in my heart towards men's motives. A year ago, I thought I should have hated you all my life."

He held forth his hand, which Maurice took and shook heartily in his.

"Understand me," said Sidney, still coldly, "I forgive you, but I do not need your help, and your presence, under any circumstances, will always give me pain. We shall never be true friends—we shall respect each other better apart."

"Is it fair to think that? You who have heard me declaim against my vain and objectless life."

"Yours is a life to rejoice at, and to do good with, not to mourn over. Seek a wife, man, and settle down in your sphere, honoured by good men, and honouring good things."

"Ah! fair advice; but the wife will come for my money's sake, for the good things which *I* possess, and which she and her relations will honour in their way, with all their heart and soul, and strength!"

"Timon of Athens!" said Sidney, almost satirically.

"Sidney, I would give up all my chances for one or two true friends. You don't know what a miserable wretch I am!"

"You will be better presently. You have seen too much life lately, and the reaction has rendered you *blasé*. Patience and wait. As for the wife——"

"Well?"

"Seek out Harriet Wesden again, and do her justice."

"But you——"

"She never loved me, Maurice; you were her first love and her last. She is leading a life that is unfit for her, and you can make amends for all the shadows you have cast upon it."

"I could never face her."

"Then you are a greater coward than I thought."

"It's odd advice," he muttered; "seek out Harriet Wesden again! Oh! I know how that will end, and what 'good' will result from that. But *you* wish it?"

"Yes," said Sidney, after a moment's further reflection.

"And her address?"

Sidney repeated it; he took it down in his pocket-book, and then rose to depart.

"I am going now. I may trouble you once again, Sidney, if you will allow me."

"As you will—if you think it necessary."

Maurice Hinchford shuffled with his feet uneasily, keeping his eyes fixed on his blind cousin.

"May I ask," he said at last, "if—if you are happy here?"

"Yes, as happy as it is possible for one in my condition to be."

"They are kind to you?"

"Very kind."

"They are a sharp couple—father and daughter—they——"

"Oh! don't speak ill of them, Maurice; you do not know them, and cannot estimate them at their just worth."

"I might endure the daughter, for hers is a pleasant sharpness that one doesn't object to; but, oh! that dreadful vigorous little parson, or whatever he is."

"Good night," said Sidney, meaningly.

"One moment—I'm off in a minute now, Sid. There's one thing I did wish just to allude to—nothing about money, mind," he added hastily, noticing Sidney's heightened colour and proud face, and remembering Mattie's previous caution.

"What is it?" asked Sidney.

"I did wish to say how sorry I was to hear of the calamity that had befallen you—that the bad news, which was told me to-day for the first time, has shocked me very much. But you'll not believe me—you still think I'm hard, cruel, and indifferent."

"No, I don't think that. But I don't care to dwell upon a painful topic."

"And about advice; what medical advice have you had, may I ask?"

"Not any."

"No advice!—why not?"

"I was told long ago that when blindness seized me it would be irretrievable. I was warned of its approach by an eminent man, who was not likely to make a mistake."

"We are all liable to mistakes in life," said Maurice, "and it might happen——"

"Pray dismiss the subject, Maurice."

"I met with a foreign oculist in Paris—he was an Italian, I think—who——"

"Good night—good night," said Sidney, hastily; "when a man has been trying hard to teach himself resignation, it is not fair to disturb him with ideas like these."

"Your pardon, Sid; I am going at once. Good night."

"Good night."

Sidney did not extend his hand again, and Maurice made no attempt to part in a more friendly manner than they had met; profuse civilities could do no good, and though Maurice had gained his cousin's forgiveness, he had not roused his respect, or won upon his sympathy.

He passed into the shop, and took up his hat that he had left there on the counter. Mr. Gray looked at him, as at a fine subject which adverse fate was to snatch away from his experiments.

"You are going, young man?"

"Yes, Sir; I hope I have not put you or your daughter to any inconvenience."

"No, Sir," was his reply, beginning to turn up the collar of his coat above his ears, "no inconvenience. You are a stranger to this

neighbourhood, and I'll just see you in the straight way, if you'll allow me."

"Oh! dear no, thank you," said the alarmed Maurice; "I'm well up in the way now—I could not think of taking you away from home at this time of night—thank you, thank you!"

He seized his hat, dashed at the lock, wrenched open the door, and flew for his life down the dark streets—no matter whither, or how far out of his route, so that he escaped Mr. Gray's companionship.

Half an hour afterwards, he was at New Cross railway station—the scene of his old duplicity—arranging for a telegraphic message to a Dr. Bario, resident in Paris.

CHAPTER III.

A DECLARATION.

Harriet Wesden had settled down like the rest of the world, that is, this little world wherein live and breathe—at least we hope so—these characters of ours.

She had settled down! Life had taken its sombre side with her; the force of circumstances had set her apart from those for whom her heart yearned; she became bound more to this dull home; disappointment had wondrously sobered her; when her heart had been at its truest and best, it had seemed as though the whole world had turned against her, and misjudged her.

There was no romance in her after that; her romance had begun early and died early—for her share in it she was heartily ashamed. To look back upon that past, note her weakness, and whither it had led her, was to make her cheeks flush, and her bosom heave; in those sober after-days that had come to her, she could scarcely comprehend the past.

Women change occasionally like this—more especially women whose hearts are sound, but whose judgments have not always been correct. She had met deceit face to face; her own presence of mind had only saved her, perhaps, from betrayal; she had passed

through a vortex—and, escaping it, the shock had sobered her for life.

Harriet Wesden turned "serious"—a very good turn for her, and for all of us, if we could only think so. Still, serious people—more especially serious young people—are inclined to dash headlong at religion, and even neglect home duties, duties to friends, and neighbours, and themselves, for religious ones. They verge on the extremes even in sanctity, and extremes verge on the ridiculous.

Harriet Wesden gave up life's frivolities, and became a trifle austere in her manner; she had found a church to her taste, and a minister to her taste—a minister who verged on extremes, too, and yet was one of the best meaning, purest-minded men in the world.

Harriet Wesden became his model member of the flock, as he became her model shepherd. She lived for him and his services, and the bran span new church he had built for himself in the square at the back. She missed never a service, week-days or Sundays; early prayers, at uncomfortable hours, when the curates were sleeping, and the pew-opener audibly snored—daily sermons, evening services, special services for special out-of-the-way saints, and Sunday services innumerable.

Let it be written here, lest our meaning be misinterpreted, that Harriet Wesden had improved vastly with all this—was a better, more energetic, and devout woman. If she went *too often* to church—that is quite possible—if she were a trifle "high" and pinned her faith on decorations, if she thought the world all vanity and vexation of spirit, if she were a little proud of carrying outward and visible signs of her own inward and spiritual grace, if she even neglected her father, at times—poor old Wesden, who sadly needed cheerful society now—still the end was good, and she was at her best then. Serious people *will* appear a little disagreeable to people who are not serious—but then what do serious people think of their mundane critics, or care for them?

Harriet Wesden fancied that she had set herself apart from the world—that its vanities and belongings scarcely had power to arrest her steady upward progress. It did not strike her that whilst she remained in the world, the sorrows, joys, and histories of its denizens must have power to affect her.

Sidney Hinchford had mistrusted her—the man for whom she had been anxious to make sacrifices had refused them, and discredited their genuineness; her only friend in whom she thought there could not be a possibility of guile, had supplanted her. From that hour let her set herself apart from them; bear no ill-feeling towards them, but keep to her new world. Her life was not their lives, and they were best away from her. After that set in more strongly the seriousness to which we have alluded, and

all former trace of Harriet Wesden's old self submerged for good —and all."

Mattie and Harriet met at times; Mattie would not give up the old friend, the girl she had loved so long and faithfully. Despite the new reserve—even austerity—that had suddenly sprung up, Mattie called at regular intervals, took her place between Harriet and Mr. Wesden, and spoke for a while of the old times. Harriet's manner puzzled her, but there seemed no chance of an explanation of it. Her quick observation detected Harriet's new ideas of life's duties, and she did not intrude upon them, or utter one word by way of argument, or in opposition. It happened, sometimes, that Harriet would be absent during Mattie's visits—"gone to church," old Wesden would say, ruefully—and Mattie would take her place by the deserted father's side, and play the part of daughter to him till Harriet's return.

Harriet seldom spoke of Sidney Hinchford to our heroine—he did not belong to her diminished world; she flattered herself that there was no thought of him, or of what might have been, to perplex her with new vanities. When the name of Sidney Hinchford intruded upon the subject of discourse, she heard it coldly enough. She was always glad to learn that Sidney was well, and doing well; it had even been a relief to her to know that the business, after a stand-still of some months, had taken a turn in the right direction; but, when all was well, what was there to agitate *her?* If Sidney were ill, and needed her help, she would have taken her place at his side, perhaps; if Mattie were ill, even—though in her heart she felt that she did not love Mattie so well as formerly—she would have devoted herself to her service; but they were both well, living under the same roof with Mattie's father, and all things had changed so since Suffolk Street times.

Harriet was from home at her usual devotions, and her father was endeavouring to amuse himself, as he best might under the circumstances, when a stranger, who preferred not to give his name, requested an audience of Miss Wesden. Miss Wesden not being at home, Mr. Wesden would do for the nonce, and the stranger was, therefore, shown into the parlour.

The *ci-devant* stationer put on his spectacles, and looked suspiciously at the new comer. Mr. Wesden was a man of the world, and hard to be imposed upon. A man more nervous and irritable with every day, but having his wits about him, as the phrase runs.

"Good evening," said the stranger.

"Good evening," responded Mr. Wesden. "Ahem—if it's a subscription for anything, I don't think that I have anything to give away."

"My name is Hinchford—Maurice Hinchford—possibly better known to you by the unenviable *alias* of Maurice Darcy."

"Oh! you're that vagabond, are you?—well, what do you want? You haven't come to torment my daughter again?" he said, in an excited manner; "you've done enough mischief in your day."

"I am aware of it, Sir—I come to offer every reparation in my power."

"We don't want any of that sort of stuff, Mr. Hinchford."

"It's late in the day to offer an apology—to attempt an explanation of my conduct in the past; but if you would favour me with a patient hearing, I should be obliged, Sir."

"I have nothing better to do," said Mr. Wesden, "take a seat Sir."

Maurice Hinchford seated himself opposite Mr. Wesden, and commenced his narrative, disguising and extenuating nothing, but attempting to analyse the real motives which had actuated his past conduct—motives which had been a little incomprehensible, taken altogether, and were therefore difficult to make clear before an auditor, as we have seen in our preceding chapter.

Mr. Wesden rubbed the back of his ear, stared hard over Maurice's head at the opposite wall, till Maurice looked behind him to see what was nailed up there; wound up by an emphatic "Humph!" when Maurice had concluded.

"Therefore you see I was not so very much to blame, Sir—that is, that there were at least extenuating circumstances."

"Were they, though?"

"Why, surely I have proved that?"

"Can't say you have—can't say that I plainly see it at all. But, then, I haven't so clear a head as I used to have—oh! not by a long way!"

"I hope at least you understand that I am heartily ashamed of my past conduct?"

"I am glad to hear that, Sir."

"I have become a different man."

"Been in a reformatory, perhaps?" suggested Mr. Wesden.

"I have found my reformatory in the world."

"Lucky for you."

"And the fact is that as I have always loved your daughter—as only my own wicked impulse turned your daughter's heart away from me, I have come from abroad with the hope of making all the restitution in my power, by offering her my hand and fortune!"

"Have you, though?"

Mr. Wesden stared harder than ever at this piece of information Maurice took another glance over his shoulder, and then commenced a second series of explanations, speaking of his position and means, two things to which Mr. Wesden had been never indifferent.

"I don't know that it would be a bad thing for her," said Mr. Wesden; "she never talked to me about her love affairs—girls never do to their fathers—and very likely I haven't understood her all this time."

"Very likely not."

"Perhaps it is about you, and not the other one, that has altered her so much. Any nonsense alters a woman, if she dwells upon it."

"Ahem!—exactly so."

"You may as well wait till she comes in now," said Mr. Wesden; "that's business."

"Sir, I am obliged to you."

"If you don't mind a pipe, I'll think it over myself, and you need not talk any more just at present. We don't have much talk in this house, and you've rather *gallied* me, Mr. Hinchford."

"Any commands I will attend to with pleasure."

Maurice Hinchford crossed his arms and sat back in his chair to reflect upon all this; for a lover he was sad and gloomy—scarcely satisfied with the step which he had taken, and yet brought to it by his own conscience, that had been roused from its inaction by his cousin Sidney. Here a life had been shadowed by his means, and he thought that it was in his power to brighten it; here was good to be done, and he felt that it was his duty at least to attempt the performance of it. Mr. Wesden sat and smoked his pipe at a little distance from him, and revolved in his own mind the strange incident which had flashed athwart the monotony of daily life, and scared him with its suddenness. In Harriet he had probably been deceived, and it was this young man whom she had loved, and whose eccentric courses had rendered her so difficult to comprehend. All the past morbidity, the past variable moods, the fluctuations in her health, were to be laid to this man's charge, and it was well that he had come at last, perhaps. Harriet was a good daughter, an estimable girl, who loved her Bible, and did good to others, but she was not a happy girl. Sorrowful as well as serious, the holiness of her life had not brightened her thoughts or lightened her heart, and was not therefore true holiness, this old man felt assured. Behind the veil there had been something hidden, and it was rather Maurice Hinchford than his blind cousin who stood between her and the light.

"I think you have done right to come," said Mr. Wesden, after half an hour's deliberation.

"I think so, too," was the response.

At the same moment, a summons at the door announced Harriet Wesden's return.

"I'll open the door myself, and leave you to explain," he said; "don't move."

Maurice felt tight about the waistcoat now; the romance was

coming back again to the latter days; the heroine of it was at the threshold waiting for him. This was a sensation romance, or the roots of his hair would not have tingled so!

Mr. Wesden opened the door for his daughter, and allowed her to proceed half way down the narrow passage before he gave utterance to the news.

"There has been a visitor waiting for you these last two hours, Harriet."

"For me!" said Harriet, listlessly; and, dreaming not of so strange an intrusion on her home, she turned the handle of the door and entered the parlour. Then she stopped transfixed, scarcely believing her sight, scarcely realising the idea that it was Maurice Darcy standing there before her in her father's house.

Maurice had risen.

"I fear that I have surprised you very much, Miss Wesden," said he, hoarsely; "that possibly this was not the best method of once again seeking a meeting with you. This time with your father's consent, at least."

"Sir, I do not comprehend; I cannot see that any valid reason has brought you to this house."

"I think it has—I hope it has."

"Impossible!"

"Miss Wesden, I have been relating a long story to your father —may I beg you to listen to me in your turn?"

"If it relate to the past, I must ask you to excuse me," was the cold reply.

"My guilty past it certainly relates to—I pray you for an honest hearing. Ah! Miss Wesden, you are afraid of me, still."

"Afraid!—no, Sir."

Harriet Wesden looked at him scornfully, with a quick, almost an impatient hand removed her bonnet and shawl, and then passed to her father's seat by the table, standing thereat still, by way of hint as to the length of the interview. She was more beautiful than ever; more grave and statuesque, perhaps, but very beautiful. It was the face that he had loved in the days of his wild youth, and it shone before him once again, a guiding star for the future, stretching away beyond that little room.

He would have spoken, but she interrupted him.

"Understand me, Mr. Darcy—Mr. Hinchford, I may say now, I presume—I wish to hear no excuses for the past, no explanations of your wilful conduct therein—I have done with that and you. If you be here to apologise, I accept that apology, and request you to withdraw. If matters foreign to the past have brought you hither, pray be speedy, and spare me the pain of any longer interview than necessary."

"Miss Wesden, I must, in the first place, speak of the past."

"I will not have it!" cried Harriet, imperiously; "have I not said so?"

The minister round the corner would have rubbed his eyes with amazement at the fire in those of his neophyte. He would have thought the change savoured too strongly of the earth from which he and her, and other high-pressure members of his flock, had soared just a little above—say a foot and a half, or thereabouts.

"It is the past that brings me back to you, Harriet—the past which I would atone for by giving you my name and calling you my wife. I have been a miserable and guilty wretch—I ask you to raise me from my self-abasement by your mercy and your love?"

He moved towards her with all the fire of the old love in his eyes —those eyes which had bewildered her like a serpent's, in the old days. But the spell was at an end, and there was no power to bring her once more to his arms. She recoiled from him with a suppressed scream; her colour went and came upon her cheeks; she fought twice with her utterance before she could reply to him.

"Mr. Hinchford, you insult me!"

"No, not that."

"You insult me by your shameless presence here. I told you half a minute ago that I forgave you all the evil in the past. *I don't forgive it*—no true woman ever forgave it yet in her heart. I hate you!"

The minister round the corner would have collapsed at this, as well he might have done. Only that evening had he begged his congregation to love their enemies, and return good for evil, and Harriet Wesden had thought how irresistible his words were, and how apposite his illustrations. And fresh from good counsel, this young woman, who had been unmoved for twelve long months, and during that time had been about as animate as the Medicean Venus, now told her listener there that she hated him with all her heart!

"Enough, Miss Wesden. I have but to express my sorrow for the past, and take my leave. Forgive at least the motive which has led me to seek you out again."

"One moment—one moment!" said Harriet.

She fought with her excitement for an instant, and then with a hand pressed heavily upon her bosom, to still the passionate throbbing there, she said:

"You must not go till I have explained also; you have sought out a girl whose young life you cruelly embittered by your perfidy —let her explain something in defence. Mr. Hinchford, I never loved you—as I stand here, and as this may be my last moment upon earth, I swear that I never loved you in my life! There was

a girl's vanity, in the first place—almost a childish vanity, fostered by pernicious teaching of frivolous companions—afterwards there was a foolish romantic incertitude—vanity still, perhaps—that led me to trust in you, and to give up one who loved me, and for whom I ought to have died rather than have deserted—but there was no love! I knew it directly that I guessed your cowardice, for I despised you utterly then, and understood the value of the prize my own misconduct had nearly forfeited. I was a weak woman, and you saw my weakness, and hastened to mislead me; but the wrong you would have done me taught me what was right, and, thank God! I was strong enough to save myself! There, Sir, if only to have told you this I am glad that you have sought an interview. Now, if you are a gentleman—go!"

He hesitated for an instant, as though he could have wished, even in the face of her defiance, to tell his story for the third time; then he turned away, and went slowly out of the room, defeated at all points, his colours lowered and trailing in the dust. Outside he found Mr. Wesden, standing with his back to the street door, smoking his pipe, and regarding the hall mat abstractedly. He looked up eagerly as Maurice Hinchford advanced.

"Well?—well?" he asked feverishly.

"Yes, it is well," was the enigmatic and gloomy answer. "I see what a fool I have been, Mr. Wesden. I know myself for the first time. Good evening."

Mr. Wesden opened the door for him and he passed out; the old man watched him for a while, and then returned to his favourite chair in the back parlour.

Harriet ran to him as he entered, and flung her arms round his neck.

"I have you to love, and look to still. Not quite alone—even yet!"

CHAPTER IV.

MORE TALK OF MARRIAGE AND GIVING IN MARRIAGE.

Maurice Hinchford passed away from this story's scene of action. Suddenly and completely he disappeared once more, and they in the humble ranks of life knew nothing of his whereabouts. From Paris his father had received a letter that perplexed and even irritated him, for it was mysterious, and the head of the house of Hinchford detested mystery.

"I have run over here for a week or two—perhaps longer, perhaps less, according to circumstances," Maurice wrote; "you who are ever indulgent will excuse this flitting, which I will account for on my return. If anything calls for my especial attention at the bank, telegraph to me, and I will come back."

No especial business was likely to demand Maurice's return; the bank went on well without him, good man of business as he was when he set his mind to it. His father's indulgence excused the flitting, though he shook his head over his son's eccentricity, after the receipt of the incomprehensible epistle. "Another of those little weaknesses to which Maurice had been subject," thought the indulgent father; "time he grew out of them now, and married and settled, like other young men of his age. If he would only sow his wild oats, what an estimable man and honoured member of society he would be. Poor Maurice!"

Sidney Hinchford, who, from his cousin's hints, had anticipated a second visit from Maurice, felt even a little disappointed at his non-appearance. Sidney was curious; he would have liked to know the result of Maurice's proposal to Harriet Wesden, but he kept his curiosity to himself, and did not even mention to Mattie the advice which he had bestowed upon his cousin. He knew how the matter had ended well enough; Maurice was in earnest, and would beat down all doubts of his better nature developing itself at last; the old love-story would be resumed, and all would go merry as a marriage bell with those two. He congratulated himself upon having done some good even at the eleventh hour, in having helped to promote the true happiness of the girl he had once loved.

Once loved!—yes, he was sure that passion belonged to the past; that it had died out of inaction, and left him free to act. He was not happy in his freedom; his heart was growing heavier than ever, but he kept *that* fact back for his friends' sakes, and was, to them, a

faint reflex of the Sidney Hinchford whom they had known in better days.

He fell no longer into gloomy reveries; he took part in the conversation of the hour; there came, now and then, a pleasant turn of speech to his lips, a laugh with him—the old, rich, hearty laugh—was not a very rare occurrence; he believed himself resigned to his affliction, content with his position, and, for many mercies that had been vouchsafed unto him, he was truly grateful.

How to show his gratitude did not perplex him; he had made up his mind after Ann Packet had given him a piece of hers—he had watched for words, signs, sighs—he was only biding his time to speak. But he remained in doubt; it was difficult to probe to the depths; he was a blind man, and far from a clever one; he could only guess by sounds, and test all by Mattie's voice, and he was, therefore, still unsettled.

He resolved to end all, at last, in a quiet and methodical manner, befitting a man like him. He was probably mistaken; he had no power to make any one happy; his confession might dissolve the partnership between Mr. Gray and himself—for how could Mattie and he live in the same house together after his avowal and rejection?

But he had made up his mind, and he went to work in his old straightforward way one evening when Mattie was absent, and Mr. Gray was busy at his work beside him.

"Mr. Gray," said he, "I want to bespeak your sole attention for a few minutes."

"Certainly, Sidney, was the reply. Shall I put my work away?"

"If you do not mind, for a while."

"There, then!"

Sidney was some time beginning, and Mr. Gray said—

"It's about the business—you're tired of it?"

"On the contrary, I am pleased with it, and the work it throws in *my* way. But don't you find me a little bit of a nuisance always here?"

"You know better than that. Next to my daughter, do you hold a place in my heart."

"Thank you. Now, have you ever thought of me marrying?"

"Of *you* marrying!" he echoed, in a surprised tone, that was somewhat feigned. "Why, whom are you to marry, Sid?"

"Mattie, if she'll have me."

The lithographer rubbed his hands softly together; it was coming true at last, this dream of Mattie and his own!

"If she'll have you!" he echoed again. "Well, you must ask her that."

"Do you think she'll have me—a blind fellow like me? Is it quite right that she should, even?"

"I don't know; I have often thought about that," said Mr.

Gray, forgetting his previous expression of astonishment. "I don't see where the objection is, exactly, Sidney. You're not like most blind men, dulled by your affliction—and Mattie is very different from most girls. If she thought that she could do more good by marrying you, make you more happy, she would do it."

"I don't want a sacrifice; I want to make her happy," said Sidney, a little peevishly. "If she could not love me, as well as pity me, I wouldn't marry her for all the world."

"You must ask her, young friend—not me, then."

"But you do not refuse your consent?"

"No. My best wishes, young man, for your success with the dearest, best of girls. I," laying his hand on Sidney's shoulder for a moment, "don't wish her any better husband."

Sidney had not exhibited any warmth of demeanour in breaking the news to Mr. Gray; many men might have remarked his quiet way of entering upon the subject. But Mr. Gray was of a quiet, unworldly sort himself, and took Sidney's love for granted. How was it possible to know Mattie, to live beneath the same roof with her, and not love her very passionately?

"I think—mind, I only think—that Mattie will not refuse you, Sidney," said Mr. Gray; "she understands you well, and knows thoroughly your character. It's an unequal match, remembering all the by-gones, perhaps—but you are not likely to taunt her with them, or think her any the worse for them, knowing what she really is in these days, thanks to God!"

"Taunt her!—good Heaven!"

"Hush! that's profane. And the match is not very unequal, considering the help you need, and what a true comforter she will be to you. We Grays are of an origin lost in obscurity; you Hinchfords come of a grand old stock; you don't consider this?"

"Not a bit."

"Nor I; but then, men who don't spring from old families are sure to say so. I'm not particularly struck with the advantages of having possessed a forefather who came over with the Conqueror. William the Norman brought over a terrible gang of cut-throats and robbers, and there's not a great deal to one's credit in being connected with that lot."

Sidney laughed.

"I never regarded it in that light before. What an attack on our old gentility!"

"Gentility will not be much affected, Sidney. Have you anything more to tell me?"

"Nothing now."

"Not that if you marry Mattie, the crabbed, disputatious local preacher may stop with you?"

"I hope he will. He has been a good friend to me, and will keep so, for his daughter's sake."

"And for your own, young man. I'll go back to my work now."

But the work was in his way after that, and all the effects of his strong will could not make it endurable. Sidney's revelation had disturbed his work; he would try a little silent praying to himself—a selfish prayer he felt it was, and therefore no sound escaped him—that this choice of Sidney's might bring comfort and happiness to his daughter and himself.

He was sitting with his large-veined hands spread before his face, and Sidney was wrapt in thoughts of the change that might be in store for him, when Mattie knocked at the door.

"Sit here—I shan't come back yet awhile. We may as well end this part of the business at once."

Mattie entered, found her father busy behind the counter with his stock, said a few words, and passed into the parlour.

It was a second version of the proceedings at Camberwell. The father holding aloof, and giving suitor and maiden fair play.

CHAPTER V.

MATTIE'S ANSWER.

Sidney Hinchford heard the door open, and knew that the end was come. In a few minutes was to be decided the tenor of his after-life. He did not move, but remained with his hands clasped upon the table—a grave and silent figure in the lamp-light.

"What makes you so thoughtful to-night, Sid?"

The more formal Mr. Sidney had been dropped long since; Mattie had resisted the encroachment as long as it was in her power, but the friendship between them had been increased as well as their intimacy, and the more familiar designation was the more natural of the two.

"Am I looking very thoughtful, then, Mattie?"

"Oh! so cross and black!"

"Black?—eh!" he repeated; that's a singular colour to seize upon a man's countenance, when he is agitated and hopeful. Come and sit here by my side, Mattie, and hear what news I have wherewith to startle you."

"Not bad news?" she asked.

"You shall judge."

Mattie guessed the purport of the news, and there had been no necessity for her last query. She knew all that was coming now, and so prepared herself for a revelation that she had seen advancing months ago. Months ago, she had wondered how she should act on this occasion, what manner she should adopt, and in what way reply to him? She had rehearsed it in her mind, with fear and trembling, and tear-dimmed eyes; she had dreamed of it, and been very happy in her dreams; and now at last she was at fault, and her resources not to be relied on. Very pale, with her mind disturbed, and her heart throbbing, she took her place by his side, shawled and bonneted as she was, and waited for the end.

Sidney broke the ice. The first few words faltered somewhat on his lip, but he gathered nerve as he proceeded, and finally related very calmly—almost too calmly—and plainly, the state of his feelings towards her.

"Your father and I have been speaking of you during your absence; I have suggested to him a change of life for myself and you—if you will only consent to sacrifice a life for my sake! A selfish, and an inconsiderate request, Mattie, which I should not have thought of, had I not fancied that it was in my power to make you a good husband, a true and faithful husband, and to love you more dearly as a wife than friend. But always understand, Mattie, that on your side it will be a sacrifice—that no after-repentance, only my death, can relieve you from the incubus—that for life you are tied to a blind man, and that all natural positions of life are reversed, when I ask you to be my guide, protector, comforter! Always remember, too, Mattie, that without me you will be free, and your own mistress; you, a young woman, to whom will come fairer and brighter chances!"

It was an odd manner of proposing; possibly Mattie thought so herself, for she raised her eyes from the ground, and looked at him long and steadily.

"Sidney, have you well reflected on this step?" she asked.

"I have."

"Thought well of the sacrifice of all the past hopes you have had?—of the *incubus* that I may be to you some day—that without me you will be free, and your own master—you, to whom the fairer, brighter chance may come, when too late? Sidney, we know not what a day may bring forth!"

"My fate is in your hands, Mattie."

"What I have been, you know—you must have thought of lately. What I am now, a poor, plain girl, self-taught and homely, who may shame you with her ignorance—you know, too. Sidney, I have dwelt upon this lately—until this night, now I am face to face with the truth, I thought that I had made up my mind."

"To refuse me?"

"No—to accept you. To be your loving wife through life, aiding you, and keeping you from harm; but, now I shrink back from my answer!"

"Ah!" he said, mournfully; "it is natural."

"Not for my own sake," she added, quickly, "but for yours! For your happiness, not mine! Sidney, you have *not* settled down; you are not resigned to this present lot in life; there is a restlessness which you subdue now you are well and strong, but which may defeat you in the days to come. Years hence, I may be a trouble to you—a regret—you, a gentleman's son, and I—a stray! I may have made amends for my past life, but I cannot forget it; there will come times when to you and me the memory may be very bitter yet!"

"No, no!"

"Sidney, when I was that neglected child, I think I had a grateful heart; for I appreciated all the kindness that helped me upwards, and turned me from the dangerous path I was pursuing. I did not forget one friend who stretched his helping hand towards me—I have remembered them all in my progress, the agents of that good God, whose will it was that I should not be lost! Sidney, I would marry you out of gratitude for that past, if I honestly believed you built your happiness upon me; but I could not let you marry *me* out of gratitude, or think to make me happy by a share of affection that had no real existence. I would do all for you!" she said, vehemently; "but you must make no effort to raise *me* from any motives but your love!"

Sidney started—coloured. Had he misunderstood Mattie until that day?—was he the victim of his own treacherous thoughts after all?—the dupe of an illusion which he had hoped to foster by believing in himself?

"Sidney, I will be patient and wait for the love—hope in it advancing nearer and nearer every day—strive for it, even, if you will, and it lies in my power. But I am above all charity."

"Mattie, you are not romantic? You do not anticipate from me, in my desolate position, all the passionate protestations of a lover? You will believe that I look forward to you as the wife in whom alone rests the last chance of happiness for me?"

"We cannot tell what is our last chance," said Mattie; "it is beyond our foresight—God will give us many chances in life, and the best may not have fallen to your share or mine. Sidney, there *was* a chance of happiness for you once—on which you built, and in which you never thought of me—do you regret that now?" she asked, with a woman's instinctive fear that the old love still lingered in his heart.

"Mattie, I regret nothing in the past. And in the future, I am hopeful of your aid and love. Can I say more?"

"Sidney," said Mattie, after a second pause, "I will not give you my answer to-night; I will not say that I will be your wife, for better for worse, until this day month. It is a grave question, and I ought not to decide this hastily. I must think—I *must* think!"

"Ah! Mattie, you don't love me, or it would be easy enough to say 'Yes,'" said Sidney.

"No, not easy."

"I can read my fate—eternal isolation!" he said, gloomily.

"Patience—you can trust me; let me think for a while if I can trust in you. You do not wish my unhappiness, Sid?"

"God forbid!"

"We have been good friends hitherto—brother and sister. For one more month, let us keep brother and sister still; there is no danger of our teaching ourselves to love one another less in that period. In that month will you think seriously of me—not of what will make me happy—but what will render *you* happy, as the fairy books say, for ever afterwards? Remember that it is for ever in this life, and that I am to sit by your side and take that place in your heart which you had once reserved for another—think of all this, and be honest and fair with me."

"I see. You distrust my love. You have no faith in my stability."

"I say nothing, Sidney, but that I feel it would be wrong to answer hastily. Are you offended with my caution?"

"No—God bless you, Mattie!—you are right enough."

"This day month I will take my place at your side, and give you truly and faithfully my answer. It is not a long while to wait—we shall have both thought more intently of this change."

She left him, to begin his thoughts anew; her reply had disturbed his equanimity; he neither understood Mattie nor himself just then. What had perplexed him?—what had come over the spirit of his dream to trouble his mind, or conscience, in so strange a manner?

Mattie went to her room and locked the door upon her thoughts, upon that new wild sense of happiness which she had never known before, and which, despite the character she had assumed—yes, assumed!—she could not keep in the background of that matter-of-fact life, now vanishing away from her. She knew that she had acted for the best in giving him time to think again of the nature of his proposition—in restraining that impulse to weep upon his shoulder, and feel those strong arms enfolding her to his breast. The old days had startled her when he had spoken in so firm and hard a manner; that figure of the past which had been all to him flitted there still, and held her back, and stood between herself and him, despite the new happiness she felt, and which no past could wholly scare away.

She believed in her own coming happiness; that he would love her better for the delay—understand more fully why she hesitated.

When the time came to answer "Yes!" she would explain all that had perplexed her, arrested her assent midway, and filled her with the fears of his want of love for her, his future discontent when irrevocably bound to her. Twice in life now he had offered his hand in marriage; twice had the answer been deferred, for reasons unakin to each other. It was singular; but this time all would end happily. He would love her with his whole heart, as he had loved Harriet Wesden, and she would be his proud and happy wife, cheering his prospects, elevating his thoughts, doing her best to throw across his darkened life a gleam or two of sunshine, in which he might rejoice.

She was very happy—for the doubts that had kept her answer back went farther and farther away as she dwelt upon all this. There was a restless beating at her heart, which robbed her of calmness for a while, but it was not fear that precipitated its action, and the noises in her ears might be the distant clash of marriage bells, which she had never dreamed would ring for him and her!

END OF THE SEVENTH BOOK

BOOK VIII.

MORE LIGHT.

CHAPTER I.

A NEW HOPE.

WHETHER Sidney Hinchford gave much ulterior thought to his proposal, is a matter of some doubt. He had made up his mind before his conversation with Mr. Gray and daughter, and had there been no real love in his heart, he would not have drawn back from his offer. His life apart from business was akin to his business life in *that;* reflection on what was best, just and honourable, and then his decision, which no adverse fate was ever afterwards to shake. He did not believe in any motive force that could keep him from a purpose—it was a vain delusion, unworthy of a Hinchford!

On the morning of the following day, the cousin of whom he had thought more than once entered again upon the scene of action; at an early hour, when Mattie was busy in the shop, and Mr. Gray was absent on a preaching expedition. Maurice Hinchford's first inquiry was if Mr. Gray were within, and very much relieved in mind he appeared to be upon receiving the information that that formidable Christian was not likely to be at home till nightfall. Maurice did not come unattended; he brought a friend with him, whom he asked to wait in the shop for a while, whilst he exchanged a few words with Sidney.

Mattie looked at the stranger, a tall, lank man, with an olive face

and long black hair, which he tucked in at the back between his coat and waistcoat in a highly original manner. He was a man who took no interest in passing events, but sat "all of a heap" on that high chair which had been Maurice Hinchford's stool of repentance, carefully counting his fingers, to make sure that he had not lost any coming along.

"Good morning, Sidney," said Maurice, on entering. "Not lost yet, old fellow!"

"Good morning, Maurice."

"I have brought the latest news—I have been abroad since my last visit here."

"Abroad again?"

"I'll tell you about that presently. If you're not too busy this morning, and I'm not too unwelcome an intruder, I should be glad to inform you how I fared by following your advice."

"You are not unwelcome, Maurice, though I cannot say that there is any great amount of pleasure experienced by your visit to me."

"Still cold—still unapproachable, after forgiving all the past!"

"But not forgetting, Maurice. You bring the past in with you—I hear it in every accent of your voice; all the figures belonging to it start forth like spectres to dismay me."

"Your past has no reproaches—what is it to mine?"

"A regret is as keen as a reproach."

"Ah! you regret the past!—some act in it, perhaps?" said Maurice, with curiosity.

"We should scarcely be mortal if we could look back without regrets, I think."

"Ah! but what is the keenest—bitterest?"

"That is a leading question, as the lawyers say."

"Then I'll not press it—I'll speak of my own regrets instead. I regret having followed your advice, Sidney."

"We are all liable to err—I meant it for the best."

"I called the following evening on Harriet Wesden—I offered her my hand, as an earnest of that affection which only needed her presence to revive again—I asked pardon for my past, and spoke of my atonement in the future. Could I do more?"

"No."

Sidney was nervously anxious to learn the result, but he merely compressed his lips, and waited for the sequel. He would not ask how this had ended—his pride held back his curiosity.

"And she refused me, as you and I might have expected, had we more seriously considered the matter. By George, I shall never forget her fiery eyes, her angry gestures, her contempt, which seemed withering me up—I knew that it was all over with every shadow of hope, then."

"A man should never despair."

"It would be difficult to help it in the face of that clincher, Sidney Well, it served me right; I might have expected it; I might have guessed the truth, had I given it a moment's thought; but I put my trust in you, Sidney, and a nice mess I have made of it! Upon my honour, I would rather bear two—say three—of Mr. Gray' sermons, than face Harriet Wesden again."

"Still, you should not be sorry at having offered all the reparation in your power."

"Well, now I come to think of it, Sidney, I'm not sorry. To confess the real plain truth, I'm glad."

"Indeed!"

"Because I have made a discovery, and if you're half a Hinchford, you'll profit by the hint. Harriet Wesden loves *you*."

Sidney's hands grappled the arms of his chair, in which he half rose, and then set down again. The red blood mounted to his face, even those dreamy eyes flashed fire again—the avowal was too decided and uncompromising not to affect him.

"I do not wish to dwell upon this topic."

"Ah! but I do. It has been bothering me all the way to Paris—all the way back. I have been building fancy castles concerning it. I have been one gigantic, unmitigated schemer since I saw you last, planning for a happiness which is yours by a word, and which you deserve, Sid Hinchford. I feel that your life might be greatly changed, and that it is in your power to effect it."

"Were it my wish, it is too late. As it is not my wish—as I do not believe you," he added, bluntly—"as I have outlived my youthful follies, and am sober, serious, and unromantic—as I have made my choice, and know where my happiness lies, I will ask you not to pain me—not to torture me, by a continuance of this subject."

"Let me just give you a sketch of what she said to me."

"I will hear no more!" he cried, with an impatient stamp of his foot.

"I have done," said Maurice; "subject deferred *sine die*—or tied round the neck with a big stone, and sunk for ever in the waters of oblivion. By George, Sid, that's a neat phrase, isn't it?—only it reminds one of drowning a puppy. And now to business."

"What more?" asked Sidney, curtly.

His cousin had annoyed him; stirred up the acrimony of his nature, and destroyed all that placidity of demeanour which he had fostered lately. He felt that he rather hated Maurice Hinchford again; that his cousin was ever a dark blot in the landscape, with his robust health, loud voice, and self-sufficiency. This man paraded his own knowledge of human nature too obtrusively, and spoke as if his listener was a child; he professed to have discerned in Harriet

Wesden an affection for the old lover to whom she had been engaged, as if he, Sidney Hinchford, had been blind all his life, or was morally blind then! Sidney would be glad to hear the last of him—to be left to himself once more; his cousin was an intrusion—he desired no further speech with him, and he implied as much by his last impatient query.

"It's something entirely new, Sidney, and therefore you need not fear any old topics being intruded on your notice. I have brought a friend to see you."

"Take him away again."

"No, I'd rather not, thank you," was the aggravating response; "I made my mind up to bring him, and he's waiting in the shop."

"Maurice—you insult me!"

"Pardon me, cousin, but the end must justify the means. He has come from Paris to see you; he would have been here before, had not illness prevented him."

"Who is this man?"

"The cleverest man in Europe, I'm told—an eccentric being, with a wonderful mine of cleverness beneath his eccentricity. A man who has made the defects of vision his one study, and has become great in consequence. Sidney, you must see him!"

"You bring him here at your own expense, to inspect a hopeless case; you will shame me by being beholden to you—to you, of all men in the world!"

"I thought we had got over the past—forgiven it?"

"Yes, but——"

"But it can't be forgiven, Sid Hinchford, if you hinder me making an effort to atone to you in my way."

"With your purse?" was the cold reply.

"No; with my respect for you—my regret for a friend whom I have lost."

"A strange friend!"

"And I have faith in this man. I remember a case similar to yours, which——"

"Stop! in the name of mercy, Maurice—this cannot be borne, at least. I am resigned to despair, but not to such a hope as yours. Let him come in, and laugh at you for your folly in bringing him hither."

"Bario!" called Maurice.

The lank man came into the parlour, set his hat on a chair, and looked at Sidney very intently. His vacuity of expression vanished, and a keen intelligence took its place.

"Good morning, Sir," he said, in fair English "you are the blind gentleman Mr. Hinchford has requested me to see?"

"The same, Sir."

"You are sure you're blind?"

"Maurice, this man is a——"

"Yes, very clever. You have heard of Dr. Bario—he has been resident in Paris some years now."

"Ah!" said Sidney, listlessly.

"There is a blindness that be not blindness, Sir—that's my theory," said the Italian; "a something that comes suddenly like a blight—the offspring of much excitement, very often."

"Mine had been growing upon me for years—I was prepared for it by a man as skilful as yourself."

"May I put to you his name?"

Sidney told him, and Dr. Bario gave his shoulders that odious French shrug which implies so much. Such is the jealousy of all professions—extending even to the disciples of the healing art. A never thinks much of B, if he be jumping at the same prize on the bay-tree—Dr. Bario had his weakness.

"He might have mistaken the disease, and into this have half frightened you. People, odd mistakes do make at times—I myself have not been infallible."

"Possibly not," said Sidney, drily.

"In my youth, of course," said the vain man, "when I listened a leetle too much to the opinions of others—it was once my way."

Sidney thought the speaker had altered considerably since then, but kept his idea to himself. He was endeavouring to be cool, and uninfluenced by this man's remarks; but they had set his heart beating, and his temples painfully throbbing. He was a fool to feel unnerved at this; it was a false step of his cousin's, and had given him much pain—but Maurice had meant well, and he forgave him even then.

"Do you mind turning just one piece more to the light?" asked the doctor.

Sidney turned like an automaton. Maurice drew up the back parlour blind; the doctor bent over his patient, and there was a long silence—an anxious pause in the action of three lives, for the doctor's interest was as acute as the cousin's.

"Well?" Maurice ejaculated at last.

"There's a chance, I think."

"A chance of sight!" cried Sidney; "do you mean that?—is it possible that you can give me hope of that—now?"

"I don't give hope, Sir," said Dr. Bario; "it's a chance, that's all—everything. It's one nice case for *me*—not you, young man."

"What do you mean?"

"There's danger in it—it's light, death, or madness! I do not you advise to risk this—but there's one chance if you do!"

"*I will chance it!*"

He was not content with the present, then; it had been a false placidity—he would risk his life for light; life without it, even with Mattie, did not seem for an instant worth considering!

"Very good. To-morrow I will you send for—you will have to place yourself entire under my direction for more weeks than one, before the final operation be attempted."

"I agree to everything—may I accompany you now?"

"To-morrow," was the answer again.

"Oh! it will never come. Maurice," he said, offering his hand, "however this ends, I am indebted to you."

"Yes—but—but if it end badly?"

"It will be God's will."

"And if it end as I hope and trust—as I fancy it will, Sid—then you must pay that debt, or I'll never forgive you."

"In what way can I ever repay it?"

"By taking your old place at the banker's desk, and showing me that the past is really forgiven."

"I will do that if—ah! what a mighty If this is!"

"Keep hopeful—not nervous, above all the things," said the doctor; "if you fear, it must not be attempted."

With this final warning, the doctor and Maurice withdrew. Maurice left the doctor to whisper confidentially to Mattie.

"Miss Gray, I have brought a skilful oculist to look at my cousin Sid. He reports not altogether unfavourably—he gives us hope—Sid will go away with us to-morrow."

"Go away!"

"Yes, to submit himself for a week or two to Dr. Bario's treatment; he says that he will chance the danger, and I think he's right. Keep him strong and hopeful, Miss Gray—much depends upon that."

"Yes—yes," gasped Mattie.

She had not recovered her astonishment when the visitor had left the shop; "hope for Sidney!"—"going away!"—"keep him stong!"—was all this a dream?

"Mattie," called Sidney from the parlour, and our heroine rushed in at once and found our hero walking up and down the room with a freer step than she had witnessed in him since his blindness.

"Mattie," he said in an agitated voice, "he tells me that there is a chance of the light coming back to me—a chance that entails danger, but which is surely worth the risk. Think of the daylight streaming in upon my darkened senses, and my waking up once more to life!"

"I am so glad!—I am so very glad!" cried Mattie; adding the instant afterwards, "but the—the danger? What is that?"

"A danger of death, or of my going mad, he left it doubtful

which—I don't care which—I can risk all for the one chance ahead of me. I will keep strong, praying for the brightness of the new life."

"Yes!" was the mournful response. In that brightness, one figure might at least grow dim—in the darkness he had learned to love her, he said! But he was not thinking of love then, or of her whose love he had sought;—a new hope was bewildering him, and he could not escape it.

"Keep him strong and hopeful," had been the caution given Mattie; there was no need for it. He *was* hopeful—far too hopeful—of the sunshine; he thought nothing of the danger, or of a world a hundred times worse than that of his benighted one—and he was strong in faith. He could talk of nothing else, and Mattie made no effort to distract his mind away from it. It was natural enough that he should forget her for a while; the time had not come for her to answer him, or to judge him; he had said that his mind was made up, and that she possessed his love—surely they were earnest words enough, to keep her hopeful in her turn!

And if the change in Sidney did result in Sidney's cure, she would rejoice in it with all her heart—as his father would have rejoiced, had he lived and known the troubles of his boy.

The next day, Maurice Hinchford arrived in his father's carriage to take Sidney away. Sidney was equipped for departure, and had been waiting for his cousin the last two hours—agitating his mind with a hundred reasons for the delay.

The carriage at the door, and the evidence of wealth in Sidney's relations, made Mattie's heart sink somewhat—his would be a world so different from hers for ever after this!

Mattie faced Maurice before he entered the parlour. She had been watching for him also that day, and now arrested his progress.

"Mr. Hinchford, you did me harm once; you were sorry at a later day that it was not in your power to make amends. Will you now?"

"Willingly."

"Let me know when Sidney runs his greatest risk—give me fair warning of it, that his friends may be near him. If there be a risk of death, he must not die without me there. You promise?"

"I promise, Miss Gray."

Mattie had no further request to urge, and he, after avoiding Mr. Gray by a strategic movement, and a hurried "Good day, Sir—hope you're well!" entered the parlour with the words—

"Ready, Sid?"

Sidney Hinchford took his friend's arm, Maurice signed to the footman at the door to carry Sidney's portmanteau, and then the

two cousins entered the shop—both looking strangely alike, arm-in-arm, and shoulder to shoulder thus.

"One moment, Maurice."

Sidney thought of Mattie at the last; in his own anxiety for self, he did not forget her, as she had feared he would.

"Where's Mattie?"

"Here, Sidney."

He drew her aside—away out of hearing, where neither Mr. Gray nor his cousin could listen to his grateful words.

"Mattie, dear," he said, "I know that I shall have your prayers for my success—you, who have fought my battles, and been always ready at my side. Pray for our bright future together; it will come now. Whatever happens, you and I together in life, my girl, unless, with that month's reflection that I granted you, comes the want of trust in my sincerity!"

"Never that, Sidney."

"Good-bye."

He stooped and kissed her, and Mattie shrank not away from him, though it was the first time in his life that his lips had touched hers. He was going away from that house for ever, perhaps; they might never know each other again; and she loved him too dearly, and felt too happy in those fleeting moments, to feel abashed at this evidence of his affection.

So they parted, and Ann Packet, who had heard the story, rushed from the side door to fling a shoe, for luck, after the receding carriage. A maniacal act, that the footman—who had *not* heard the story—was unable to account for, save as a personal insult to himself.

"He had gone out of his spear to a place called Peckham," he said afterwards in the servants' hall, "and had had old boots flung at him by the lower horders!"

CHAPTER II.

MATTIE IS TAKEN INTO CONFIDENCE.

SIDNEY'S departure made a difference in the house; it was scarcely home without him now. Mattie and Mr. Gray took their usual places after the day's business was over, and looked somewhat blankly at each other. The father had become attached to Sidney, as well as the daughter; he was nervous as to the result of the mysterious system under which his son, by adoption, had placed himself.

He had no faith in cures effected by men who were not of the true faith—whatever that might mean in Mr. Gray's opinion—he would have liked to see this Dr. Bario himself, and sound him as to his religious convictions. If he were a Roman Catholic, Sidney's chance of success was very small, he thought.

Mattie did not take this narrow view of things; but she was anxious and dispirited. Anxious for Sidney and the result—dispirited at a something else which she could scarcely define. Sidney's last words were ringing in her ears, but there was no comfort in them now; they were meant to encourage, but they only perplexed—all was mystery beyond. She prayed that Sidney would be well and strong again, but she felt that her happiness—her best days—would lie further off when the light came back to him. It might be fancy; the best days might be advancing to her as well as to Sidney Hinchford, but the instinctive feeling of a great change weighed upon her none the less heavily.

She did not feel in suspense about a serious result to Sidney; Sidney would get better, she thought, and the shadow of a darker life for him did not fall heavily athwart her musings.

When those whom we love are away, we are full of wonder concerning them; speculations on their acts in the distance bridge over the dreary space between us and them. "I wonder what they are doing now!" and the suggestions that follow this, wile away a great share of the time that would seem dull and objectless without them. You who are loved and are away from us do justice to our thoughts of you, and keep worthy of the fancy pictures wherein ye are so vividly portrayed!

A week after Sidney's departure, Maurice Hinchford appeared once more in the neighbourhood of Peckham. This was in the after-

noon, and he had reached Peckham in the morning, and therefore wasted a considerable portion of the day. But then Mr. Gray had been at home in the morning, and it had struck Maurice that that gentleman's excitable temperament would not allow of a long sojourn in-doors, with no one to preach to but his daughter. He would not chance meeting Mr. Gray yet a while; he would wait and watch.

Mr. Gray really found it dull work that afternoon, and business being slack, he started immediately after his dinner in search of a convert of whom he had heard in the neighbourhood of his chapel. Maurice, who had noted him turn the corner of the street, uttered a short prayer of thanks, and crossed over to the stationer's shop.

Mattie turned very pale at the first sight of Maurice.

"I am wanted—and, oh dear, my father has just gone out!"

"No, you are not wanted yet a while, Miss Gray. Pray, compose yourself, I bring you very little news."

"Sidney—he is well?"

"Very well—Dr. Bario has not given him notice to prepare for the great experiment yet a while," said Maurice; "but I thought that you might be anxious about him, Miss Gray, and that any little news might be acceptable."

"You are very kind—yes, any news of Sidney is ever most acceptable."

"Even from such a scamp as I am?" he said, with his eyes twinkling.

"Sidney has forgiven you—that is enough, Sir."

"Ah! but yours was a left-handed wrong, and the heaviest share of it might have fallen to your lot."

"But it has not. Pray don't talk of it again."

"All's well that ends well," said Maurice, taking his seat on the high chair on the shop side of the counter, facing our heroine, "and if it has ended in my doing no harm, and turning out a better fellow myself, why there's not much to regret. And you would not believe to what an extraordinary pitch of excellence I am attaining."

"I shall believe nothing if you jest, Sir."

"It was not a jest—I've a way of talking like that."

"It's a very stupid way."

"Is it, though?—well, perhaps you're right enough."

Mattie wondered what he was staying for; was even still a little nervous that he had something more to communicate concerning Sidney. But he continued talking in this new desultory way, and remained on his perch there, observant of customers, the goods they purchased, and the remarks they made, and showing no inclination to depart. He rendered Mattie fidgety after a while, for he was in a fidgety humour himself, and tilted his chair backwards and forwards,

and examined everything minutely on the counter, dropping an article or two on the floor, and endeavouring to pick it up with his varnished boots, *à la* Miss Biffin.

"Does this business answer, Miss?" he asked at last.

"It is improving—I think it will answer."

"Rather slow for old Sid, it must have been."

"We did our best to make him happy here, Sir; I think that we succeeded."

"My dear Miss Gray, I do not doubt *that*, for an instant!" Maurice hastened to apologise; "more than that, Sidney has told me the same himself. But *was* he happy?"

"Have you any reason to think otherwise?" was Mattie's quick, almost suspicious question.

"Scarcely a reason, perhaps. Still *I* don't think that he was happy."

"I am sorry to hear you say so, Mr. Hinchford."

"He tried to feel as happy as you wished to make him, but I think he failed. Under the circumstances, heavily afflicted as he was, you must own that that was natural."

"I own that."

"But his mind was never at ease—there was much to perplex it. Now, Miss Gray," leaning over the counter very earnestly, "let me ask you if you honestly believe that he has given up every thought of making Harriet Wesden his wife?"

"Every thought of it, I think he has."

"You and he have been like brother and sister together, and the truth must have escaped him," said Maurice, doubtfully; "or you are less quick-witted than somehow I have given you credit for. You would promote his true happiness, Miss Gray, by every means in your power, I am sure?"

"Yes," answered Mattie.

"Then you and I acting together might bring about that match between them yet."

"You and I acting together for that purpose!" Mattie ejaculated. She clutched the counter with her nervous fingers, and regarded Maurice Hinchford attentively; she was no longer doubtful of that man's visit to her; he had come to steal her Sidney away—to teach her, by his indirect assertions, that it was better to resign her thoughts of happiness rather than mar his cousin's.

"There only requires one fair meeting between them—one candid explanation of what was false, and what was true—to show each to the other in a better light. That is my object in life now—I have done harm to those two—I will do good if I can!"

"You speak as though you were certain of the success of Dr. Bario's remedies."

"I am perfectly certain, Miss Gray! Dr. Bario is certain, too—although he speaks of the risk, and of the hundredth chance against

him, rather than of the ninety and nine in his favour. That's his way."

"Suppose him successful, and Sidney well again—what are we to do?" asked the curious Mattie.

She was anxious to sift this theory to the bottom—to know upon what facts, or fancies, Maurice Hinchford based his cruel idea. She spoke coolly and sisterly now; no evidence of intense excitement was likely to betray her again that day. On the inner heart had shut, with a clang which vibrated still within her, the iron gates of her inflexible resolve.

"First of all, let me ask you a question. You have lived with Miss Wesden—you understand her—you have loved her. You can assure me that there was no doubt of her affection for him being true and fervent?"

"There was no doubt of that."

"I can answer for the present time."

"You can?" said Mattie. She spoke very quickly, but her heart leaped into her throat for an instant, and took away her breath.

"Miss Wesden confessed to me, only a week back, that she loved Sidney Hinchford still."

"Impossible!"

"You doubt my word, Miss Gray. Why should I attempt to deceive you?"

"What possible object could she have in telling you that?"

"I made her an offer of marriage," said Maurice, coolly, "and she rejected me. She did not scruple to confess to me her reasons; she was excited I must own, and, therefore, thrown off her guard."

"What did she say?"

"That she had never loved me, and that she would have died for Sidney. That it was all my fault—my wickedness—which had parted them."

"A singular confession for her to make," said Mattie, thoughtfully; "all my life I have been endeavouring to find the truth—the whole truth—and have always failed."

"You were not the *confidante* that I believed, then?"

"Harriet Wesden and I loved each other very dearly—in our hearts there is no difference yet. For my sake, were I in danger, she would do much."

"And for her sake—what would you do?"

"Everything."

"Well spoken," said Maurice, heartily; "I knew that I was not deceived in you."

"She is unhappy and loves Sidney. Sidney is unhappy and loves her, you think. It is a story of the truth of which we must be certain in the first place."

"Yes, and then?"

"Then we will do our best—God willing," murmured Mattie.

"I rely upon you, Miss Gray; I am obliged by the evidence of interest in those two old lovers, parted by mistake. Both very unhappy, and both with a chance of being happy together, there is no difficulty in guessing where our duty lies."

"No."

"Think of the gratitude of those two in the days when we have helped to clear the mists away, Miss Gray. The last chapter in the novel; the last scene in the five-act comedy, where the stern parent joins the hands of the happy couple, will be nothing to the glorious ending of *our* story. Boundless gratitude to you, full forgiveness for me—and all going merry as a marriage bell. Miss Gray, I engage your hand for the first dance in the evening—we'll wind up with a ball that day—is it a bargain between us?"

"I make no hasty promises," said Mattie, with a faint smile.

"Well, there will be time to talk of that idea," said Maurice, laughing; "and, talking about time, how I have been absorbing yours, to be sure! Still, time is well wasted when it is employed for others' happiness—your father could offer no objection to that sentiment. You are on my side?"

"On Sidney's, if he think of Harriet Wesden still."

"If—why haven't I proved it?—did you not say that you believed every word?"

"No, I did not say that. It—it *is* true, perhaps—I shall know better presently. Sir, I will find out the truth."

"It will be easy for an acute woman to discover the truth both in Sidney and Harriet; for the truth—for the better days, we are all waiting. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Sir; that promise to give me warning of the day which will be life or death to Sidney—you will not forget?"

"I never forget, Miss Gray. Rely upon me."

Maurice Hinchford departed, full of his hope, dreaming not of the despair that he had left behind in the heart of that simple-minded woman. He had intended all for the best; he had known nothing of Sidney's proposal to Mattie; he had relied on Mattie's sisterly affection for the man and woman in whose happiness he was deeply interested. He went on his way rejoicing—proud of the new volunteer he had enlisted in his cause, and sanguine as to a result which should bring peace to every one.

Mattie sat behind the counter in her old position after Maurice Hinchford had left her—rigid and motionless. This was the turning-point of her life—the ordeal under which she would harden or utterly give way. A customer entering the shop waited and stared and wondered at the silent figure which faced him and took no heed of his presence—at her who was finally roused to every-day life by his direct appeal to her. Mattie served him, then dropped into her

chair again, and the old stony look settled once more upon her face.

Fate was before her, and she rebelled against it; the whole truth —hard and cruel—she could not believe in. "It's not true!" her white lips murmured: "it's false, as he is! He has heard from Sidney all that Sidney purposes, and is alarmed for the honour of his family. I see it all now—a plot against me!" But "was it true?" sounded in her ears like a far-off echo, from which she could not escape.

It was a desperate struggle, and she was fighting that silent intense battle still when her father returned. Hours ago she had prayed that he might come back soon, and end that weary watch there—suffer her to escape to her own room, and lock the door upon that world upon which the mists were stealing. But when he returned, she did not go away from him; a horror of being alone and giving way like a child kept her at her post there, answering, and inwardly defying, all suspicious questions.

"You're very white, Mattie. Has anything happened?" asked her father.

"Sidney's cousin has been here. Sidney is well and hopeful."

"Good hearing!—he will be back in the midst of us before we know where we are. Mattie, I'm sure you have a headache?"

"A little one—nothing to complain about."

"Why don't you go for a walk?—it's not very late. What a time it is since you have seen Mr. Wesden!"

"I will go there."

Mattie sprang to her feet.

"Yes, I *will* go—at once."

Mattie ran up stairs, quickly dressed herself, gave one frightened glance at her own face in the dressing-glass, and then hurried down stairs away from the silence wherein she could not trust herself.

"I am going now," she said, and hurried away.

Mr. Gray was disturbed by Mattie's eagerness to depart, but explained it by the rules he considered most natural.

"She is unsettled by Sid's absence—by the danger he is in. Well, there's nothing remarkable in that."

He took his work into the shop and devoted himself to it, in the leisure that his customers—few and far between after nightfall—afforded him. When the shutters were up before the windows, and the gas turned low, he stood at the door waiting for Mattie, who was late, and speculating as to the advisability of proceeding in search of her.

Mattie came swiftly towards him whilst he watched. She had been trying to outwalk her thoughts, and failed—the odds were against her.

"Ah! that is you, Mattie!—how are they?"

"Well, I did not see Miss Wesden. She was not at home."

"All the time with that old man?" he said, with a little of his past weakness developing itself.

"We have been speaking of old times—and Harriet. Oh! dear I am very tired. May I go up to my room at once?"

"If you will—but supper is ready, Mattie."

"Not any for me. Good-night."

Mattie thought that she had made good her escape, but she was mistaken; on the stairs Ann Packet had been waiting to waylay her, and to talk of the little events of that day, any talk whatever, so that she saw Mattie for a while, after the day's labour was ended. Mattie was considerate even in her distress; she stood on the stairs listening to Ann's rambling accounts of minor things, waiting for the end of the narrative, and only expressing her weariness by a little quivering sigh, now and then.

After the story, there was Ann Packet to hold the candle closer to her face, and see a change in Mattie also. Mattie had feared this —knowing Ann's vigilance—but there was the old plea of a headache to urge, and all the old receipts of which Ann Packet had ever heard for the headache to listen to. Ann Packet knew an old woman of her workhouse days who had "dreffful headaches," and this was how she cured hers—and off went Ann Packet into more rambling incoherences.

All things have an end; Mattie was free at last. At last the door locked, and the room she had longed for, feared, and longed for again, engulphing her. Mattie took off her bonnet, opened noiselessly the window for the air which she felt she needed, and then dropped into a chair, and looked out at the dark sky, and the bright stars that were shimmering up there, where all seemed peace!

The battle was not over, and Mattie was unconvinced still.

"Is it true?" she asked again. "Is it ALL true?"

CHAPTER III.

HALF THE TRUTH.

Mattie, as we are already aware, had found Mr. Wesden the sole occupant of that house in Camberwell, whither the stationer had retired from the stirring business of life. He was alone, dull and dispirited; Harriet had gone to a thanksgiving festival at her favourite church, and her father, whom night air affected now, was left to read his newspaper, or to think of old times, as his inclination might suggest.

Harriet always offered to remain at home to keep her father company; but old Wesden was not a selfish man; he offered no objection to her departure; it would do her good, and be a change for her. It had long ago suggested itself to him that there was nothing like change to keep Harriet well and all unpleasant thoughts away from her; and if it were only the mild excitement of religious change, it was better than brooding at home over events which had passed and left marks of their ravages.

Mr. Wesden brightened up at Mattie's visit; he had put away his pipe, and was sitting with his feet on the fender and his hands on his knees, thinking of his daughter and of the chance she had lost in not marrying Maurice Hinchford, when Mattie intruded on his reverie.

The old friends—friends who had quarrelled and made it up, and become the best of friends again—sat down together and talked of the past, of what a business that was in Suffolk Street once, slow, and sure, and money-getting. Mr. Wesden was inclined to talk more in his old age, Mattie fancied, and when he drifted to the usual subject with which all topics invariably ended—his daughter—Mattie did not stop him.

She had come to find out the truth if possible—to make sure! Next to Sidney Hinchford, stood Harriet Wesden in her regard; she remembered all that Harriet had been to her, all that impulsiveness of action combined with steadiness of love, which had won Mattie towards her in the early days, and was not likely to turn her from her then.

But the truth had been hard to arrive at; Mr. Wesden spoke of Harriet's new pursuits, of her indignation at Maurice Hinchford's offer; he could tell her little more than Maurice Hinchford had done,

save that there were times when his daughter seemed very dull and thoughtful.

"P'raps it's the church, Mattie," he had said; "I wish you'd come more often and talk to her, like—like you used."

"She does not think that I have neglected her—forgotten her?"

"Oh! no."

"When I meet her here she seems very different to me—almost cold at times," said Mattie.

"Only her way, Mattie," explained the father, "she's very different to all, now. She was more like herself after Mr. Hinchford called—Lor'! that roused her for a day or two beautifully. It was quite a treat to see her out of temper all the next day—flouting like!"

Mattie waited till half-past eight and then took her leave, thinking that she would go home by the church-way and meet Harriet. But Harriet had gone round by the main thoroughfare, having a call to make, and so the old companions missed each other.

Mattie scarcely knew what she should have said to Harriet on meeting her, save the usual commonplace remarks; she fancied that she might have told her story of Sidney's proposal, and watched the effect—might have looked her sternly in the face, and asked if it were all true that Maurice Hinchford had asserted. It depended upon circumstances what she would have confessed or asserted; after all, did it matter what were Harriet Wesden's feelings, if Sidney had ceased to love Harriet and turned to Mattie Gray?

But Sidney was blind *then*, and his heart, ever full of gratitude, had deceived him. Perhaps he *had* read her secret by some means, and taken pity on her. *Pity!*—and she had told him that she scorned it! Well, true or false, right or wrong, she must wait a few days longer—for better, for worse, there was no keeping that truth back, unless it died with Sidney.

Mattie made the best of it, as usual. Hers was a mind of uncommon strength, although her slight figure and gentle face suggested to an observer the very reverse of a "strong-minded woman." The next day, she was the Mattie that deceived even her father, who had been alarmed at her yesternight. She had got over her headache, she said; she could talk of business-matters, and of going to the warehouse for fresh stock, of the customers on "the books," and of the customers—a few of them by the laws of business—who were never likely to get off them. In the morning, too, came an immense order, that staggered Mr. Gray—an order for stationery, pens, ink, and paper, &c., from Hinchford and Son, bankers.

"They've given their relation a turn—I don't think Sid would like it much," said Mr. Gray.

Mattie affected an interest in these new customers, and Mr. Gray, who admired large orders, though he was not a worldly man, trotted

about the shop and rubbed his hands. The first customer who entered, and told him that it was a fine day, was assured that "Yes it was. A fine order, a very fine order indeed!"

Orders taken, delivered, and goods paid for; time making inroads into the new week; people beginning to talk of coming spring, and of the cold weather breaking up for good; Mattie waiting for the summons to Sidney Hinchford's side, and wondering why Dr. Bario was so long; the hour in which to answer Sidney approaching, and she still unresolved as to what was best and just—for others, as well as for herself!

The message came at last—by special messenger, and private cab; a dashing Hansom, with the Hinchford crest on the panel, drawn by a thorough-bred mare, which brought out all the horse-fanciers from the livery stables at the corner to look at and admire.

Mattie opened Maurice Hinchford's hastily written note.

"Dear Miss Gray," it ran, "we have resolved upon the operation to-day. Sidney is prepared—calm and hopeful of the result. I never knew a fellow with so little fear in him. Bring Miss Wesden if you think fit.

"Yours very truly,
"Maurice Hinchford."

Bring Miss Wesden! Mattie had never thought of that, and for the first time the woman's natural jealousy seized her. Take her rival to his side, and let *her* comfort him, and she standing aloof and unacknowledged!—why should she do that? Thrust upon Sidney Hinchford's thoughts at such a time the old love; let him *see*, perhaps, Harriet Wesden's beauty and her own plain face side by side, the very instant that he stepped back, as it were, to his old self!

Then came better thoughts—thoughts more true to this high-minded stray of ours. It was light, or madness, or death; if it were a failure, and he should die, swiftly and suddenly—if till the last he had deceived her, and his true nature were to assert itself, and he express a wish—one last yearning wish to see Harriet Wesden—what could she say?—in the future how that reproach of not having done her best would crush her with remorse!

She was in the cab; she had made up her mind; there was to be no longer any hesitation.

"Drive to Myer's Street, Camberwell."

The thorough-bred mare stepped out and cleared the roadway; the shop and the little excited man at its door were in the background, and Mattie was being whirled along to Mr. Wesden's house. In a very little while, Mattie was driven to the old friend's. Mr. Wesden was gardening in his fore-court, or attempting something of the kind, with a little rake he had bought at a toy-shop; he dropped

nis rake, and stared over the private cab and its occupant at the up-stairs' windows of the opposite residence.

"Mattie," he said, when she was at the gate, and had opened it and entered before he had recovered his astonishment, "what's the matter? Who's cab is that?—the stationery business won't stand cabs, yet awhile, I know."

"Where is Harriet?—not out again?"

"No, in the parlour—this way."

Mattie and Mr. Wesden entered the house. Harriet was in the front parlour—the best room, which had been Mrs. Wesden's pride, and a dream of the old lady's in business days, working busily away at a pair of crimson slippers, with large black crosses on the instep —High Church slippers, every inch of them. Not slippers for a simpering curate to receive anonymously, as a mark of esteem from a fair unknown—Harriet was above that; but good colossal slippers, for the gouty feet of her pastor and master, who could not wear tight boots in the house, and had even been known to preach in something easy.

Harriet, who had noted the arrival, was ready to receive Mattie. She ran to her and kissed her. Harriet's first impulse was a kind and loving one, whenever she met Mattie first; only as the interview lengthened, did her doubts—if they could be called doubts—step in and range themselves formally beside her, and render her almost reserved. The kiss with which they parted, always savoured more of the new Harriet, than of the the bright-faced beauty whom Sidney had *once* loved, Mattie thought.

"Harriet, I want you to come with me, if you will," said Mattie.

"I am rather busy just now, Mattie," said Harriet; "where do you wish to take me?"

"To see Sidney Hinchford," was the calm reply.

"To see *whom!*" ejaculated Harriet.

Before Mattie could explain, Harriet added—

"What object can you have in taking me to him?—in coming in this strange hurried manner for me? Has *he* sent you?"

"No."

"He has no wish that I should be near him, I am sure. This is eccentric and foolish—what do you mean by it?"

Harriet's haughty gesture would have done more credit to royal blood than to old Wesden's.

Mattie caught her by the wrist, so that Harriet should not escape her, or hide any sign of emotion which she might wish to conceal when all was known.

"You must come! There is no excuse. In a few hours Sidney Hinchford may be dead!"

Did the change upon that face tell all, or was it the natural result of such news as Mattie had hissed forth?

"Dead!—dead, did you say?" asked Harriet hastily.

"I did not tell your father a few nights ago that Sidney had left us—I reserved the news for you, and then missed you going home. He is in the hands of clever and scientific men, who hope to cure him of his blindness."

"Yes—go on."

"But there is a chance of failure, which Sidney risks, and thinks perhaps, too lightly of. That failure will not subject him to his old estate, but drive him mad, or kill him."

"And you have let him risk his life—*you!*"

Away went the ecclesiastical slippers to the other end of the room; some wool got entangled in her hands, and she snapped it impatiently in two in preference to unwinding it; she turned to Mattie, full of reproach, fear, and indignation. Yes, the love was living still! Mattie might have known long ago that it had never died away, and that to keep it in subjection had been the task which Harriet had set herself, and failed in.

"They will murder him!—you have let them take him away to work their dangerous experiments upon, and you will have to answer for this!"

"Sidney was resolved—his cousin wished it—I had no power to stop it."

"Mattie, he loves you. He would have done as you wished."

"Who says he loves me?" asked Mattie. "I have never uttered a word to give you that belief, Harriet—have I?"

"No—but——"

"I don't own it now—I say nothing, but ask you to come with me. If I loved him, or mistrusted you, should I be here?"

"What am I to do?" asked the bewildered Harriet. "Oh! tell me, what can I do?"

"Maurice Hinchford thinks it possible—I think it possible—that Sidney may wish to speak to you before or afterwards. We may retire and see him not, or we may face him. If it should end as we all pray not, and hope not, you, at least, must not be away!"

"No, no!—I would not be away from him for all the world," cried Harriet. "I will go with you at once."

She darted out of the room, and Mr. Wesden seemed to take her place as if by magic before Mattie.

"What's it all mean, my girl?"

Mattie had to struggle with many conflicting emotions, and sober down sufficiently to relate the nature of her visit. Before she had half finished her statement, Harriet was with them again.

"Let us go at once, Mattie!—father will hear all when I return."

She almost dragged Mattie from the room; they were both in the cab, and rattling away from Camberwell, before Mr. Wesden fully comprehended that they had left him.

"Mattie, it is kind of you to think of me at this time," said

Harriet. "You have read me more truly than I have read myself. I am a wicked and unjust woman."

"No, that's not true."

"I have had wicked thoughts of you—you that I have known so long, and should have estimated so truly, knowing what you have ever been to me. But, oh! Mattie, I have been so wretched and unhappy, that you *will* forgive me?"

"Don't say any more, please."

Harriet looked askance at the pale face beside her—the eyes were half closed and the thin lips compressed.

"Do you feel ill?"

"No—the excitement of all this may have been a little too much for me—we will not talk of ourselves just now. Time enough for your confession, and for mine, when we return."

"How shall we return?—with what hopes or fears of him? What made his cousin and you think of me being near him. Did *he* wish it?"

"I don't know."

"Has *he* thought of me all this while?—loved me despite all? Oh! if that were true, Mattie."

"If it were true, Harriet—what a difference!"

"And now perhaps to die, and I never to know his real thoughts of me. Well, I should die too—I'm sure of that now!"

"Harriet, you can trust me again?"

"Yes, with all my heart."

"Patience, then—we *will* say no more until we are sure that the truth faces us."

They were silent for the remainder of the way; people who passed on the footpath, and glanced towards the occupants of that private cab, wondered at the two pale, grave-faced women sitting side by side therein.

CHAPTER IV.

ALL THE TRUTH.

The house wherein Sidney was waiting for the best or worst, was situated in Bayswater. A house that had been taken at Maurice's expense, and by Dr. Bario's suggestion. The Italian doctor was a man with a love of effect—one of those stagey beings whom we meet occasionally in England, and more often on the Continent. He was fond of mystery; it enhanced the surprise, and gained him popularity. He was a clever man, but he was also a vain one.

His style of practice he kept to himself; whether his cures were effected by the common methods of treatment, or by methods of his own, were hard to arrive at; he bound his patients and his patients' friends to secrecy; some of his English medical contemporaries called him a quack, others a madman—a few, just a few, to leaven the mass, thought that there *was* something in him. Abroad he was at the top of the tree and sought after—matter-of-fact England not being able to make him out, eyed him suspiciously.

Mattie and Harriet were ushered into a well-furnished room on the first floor, where Maurice Hinchford awaited them. He went towards them at once, and shook hands with them—even with Harriet Wesden, who had faced him with such stern words during their last interview. There was a common cause that bound all three together, and the past was forgotten.

"We are in time?" asked Mattie.

"Plenty of time, thank you."

"Where is Sidney?"

"In the room beyond there, where the curtain hangs before the door."

"Have you told him that *we* are here?" asked Mattie.

"Yes, he is very anxious to speak with you both before he is left in Dr. Bario's hands."

"You are hopeful of good results?" asked Harriet.

"Yes—very hopeful—are not you?" he asked curiously.

"No—I fear the worst."

"You have not considered the matter, Miss Wesden—this has come upon you with the shock of a surprise, and hence the feeling that distresses you. But I say he shall get better—we have all determined to make an extraordinary case of him."

"Hush, Sir!—he is in God's hands, not yours," said Harriet.

"I beg pardon—of course."

Maurice withdrew, a little downcast at Harriet's reproof; he had assumed an over-cheerful air to set them at their ease, and they had not understood him. They fancied that he was not anxious, when he felt all a brother's suspense. He had been with Sidney day and night; he had studied Sid's wishes, sought to keep him cheerful, read to him, had wound himself into Sid's heart, and by the act enlarged his own and purified it. The cousins understood each other; all the past had been atoned for now; there was no element of bitterness in the forgiveness which Maurice had sought and Sidney granted.

Maurice was called away, and presently returned with the Italian doctor, to whom he introduced Miss Wesden.

"What is there to fear, Sir?" was Harriet's first question.

She had heard all from Mattie, but was not satisfied until all had been told her again from the doctor's lips. He still spoke of the chances for and against success.

Presently, and before he had concluded, Mr. Geoffry Hinchford was ushered into the room and introduced to the ladies there.

After a bow of the old-fashioned school he said—

"This young lady," indicating Mattie, "I have had the pleasure of seeing before. Some years ago, when she thought I had a design to rob a shop in Suffolk Street. Am I right, Miss Gray?"

He spoke in jest, but Mattie responded gravely enough. It was no time for jesting, and she thought that Mr. Geoffry Hinchford's remarks were strangely *mal-ápropos*. His manner changed, when he faced Doctor Bario in his turn.

"You must cure this patient, Sir, and name your own terms. My son and I will chance your breaking the bank."

"You are good—very," said the pleased doctor, "and I am much obliged."

"We shall have him at his old post, I hope, ladies," said he, veering round to the fair sex again. "A banking-house is his proper sphere—he will rise to greatness with a fair chance. I do not know any man who deserves greatness better—a true man of business—what a contrast to his poor father!"

Maurice had withdrawn, and now returned again.

"He is ready to see the ladies now; keep him up, please, and speak cheerfully of the future—that's right, doctor, I believe?"

"Quite right."

"One at a time. Mattie, he will see you first, he says."

Mattie's heart leaped anew at this; she passed beneath the curtain which Maurice Hinchford held above her head, and went through the door to a large room where Sidney was awaiting her. The sun was shining through the windows upon him—a pale, calm figure, sitting there.

"Mattie," he said.

"Yes—I have come."

The door opened again, and Doctor Bario entered, taking up a position where he could watch his patient's face. There must be nothing calculated to excite his patient now.

Sidney shook hands with Mattie, saying—

"It has come at last—and we shall know the worst or the best in a few minutes."

"You are not nervous of the result?—your pulse beats calmly, Sidney."

"I have steeled my nerves to it—I shall not shrink, and I am hopeful."

"Miss Wesden is here."

"You fetched her hither, Maurice tells me," he answered. "You are not a jealous woman, Mattie."

"Have I a right to be jealous yet, before my mind is made up?" she answered, lightly.

"The month draws on apace—I am looking forward to the future."

"Time," said Doctor Bario, and Mattie withdrew, after a silent pressure of hands, given and returned. Mattie went towards the doctor instead of the door.

"These interviews must tend to excite him—his pulse is less regular than it was, Sir."

"I am sorry for it," said Bario, coolly, "but he will have his way—he is one man impetuous in that. He thinks it is better, in *case of anything!*"

Mattie backed from him in horror; did Sid fear the result of the experiment himself now? Harriet was waiting anxiously for her return.

"Be careful," whispered Mattie, as she passed in, and Mattie followed her with her wistful eyes. They were a long while together, she thought; longer than was necessary, or Doctor Bario should have allowed. What had Harriet Wesden to say to him?—what would she say in moments like those?

The curtain was drawn back, and Harriet, with flushed cheeks, and tearful eyes, came rapidly towards Mattie.

"What have you said to him?" asked Mattie, almost fiercely.

"What I would have said to him had he been dying—as he will die, oh! as he will die, I am sure of it."

"I pray God not," ejaculated Mattie.

"I asked him if he had forgiven me—if he would believe that when he gave me up I loved him with my whole heart, and looked for no happiness without him?"

"You told him that!—you dared to tell him that at such a time!"

"I could not have told him at any other, and he was about to be sacrificed by his own will and these mad relations, who have persuaded him to this! He will die, I am sure of it!"

"Don't say it again—I must hope, Harriet, and you drive me mad by this excitability. What have you done?"

"Strengthened his courage—been rewarded by the 'God bless you, Harriet!' which escaped him."

"Did he say no more?"

"Nothing but 'Too late!' In his heart he must feel that he will *die*, or he would not have said that! Oh! those awful words, which will ring in our ears and be our torment when this is over. Mattie, I must stop it!"

Mattie held the excited girl in her own strong arms, and backed her to a greater distance from the door of the room where Sidney was; at the same moment the banker returned from his fugitive interview with his nephew, and stood at the window taking snuff by wholesale. A confusion seemed to suddenly pervade the scene; an assistant, then another entered, and passed into Sidney's room; a third assistant ushered across the room wherein they waited a physician, with whom Mr. Geoffry Hinchford shook hands, and took snuff for an instant. Maurice looked through the curtain for an instant, held up his hand, and then withdrew again. The instant afterwards the door was locked on the inner side, and a silence as of death settled upon the three watchers without.

All was still; the thick walls and the closed doors deadened every sound. Once and only once Dr. Bario's voice giving some orders startled the banker and the two girls cowering at the extremity of the room.

"How still!" whispered Harriet at last, and Mattie bade her be silent. Mattie was listening with strained ears for sounds from within, and the fear that had beset Harriet settled at last upon herself and unnerved her. How long would it be now, each thought and wondered—minutes, hours, or what?

"This waiting is very awful," said Mr. Geoffry Hinchford, suddenly, and Mattie bade him hush also in an angry tone that made him jump again.

Suddenly the door was unlocked, and the three started up with clenched hands and suspended breath. Two of the assistants came forth hurriedly, and went out of the room. To the eager questions that were put to them they answered something in Italian, and balked the longing of their questioners. Then Maurice appeared, and cried,

"Success!—success! A statue in gold for Dr. Bario! The——"

"Hinchford," called the doctor from within, "come back—he calls you."

"No, not me," said Maurice, whose ears caught the English accent more perfectly, "*he calls Harriet*—may she come?"

"Yes, for an instant—quick!"

Harriet darted across the room with a suppressed cry; the old fear had seized her again.

"He is dying!—I knew it!"

"No, no, he will live for you!" cried Mattie, wringing her hands together; "go to him!"

Harriet passed into the room, and recoiled for an instant at the utter darkness and blackness of the place she had left so light. Maurice put his hands upon her wrist, and drew her forwards. Dr. Bario's voice arrested him.

"He has fainted—take her out again. He must speak to no one any more to-day."

"But he will die!—oh! Sir, will he not die?" cried Harriet.

"He will live; he will be as well in three weeks as ever—please withdraw."

Harriet and Maurice Hinchford came back together.

"There is no use in waiting," Maurice said, "the result is as successful as I anticipated. Let me recommend you to return home at once, Miss Wesden. Miss Gray will accompany you, I am sure."

"Mattie, will you come with me?" asked Harriet, faintly.

Mattie moved like an automaton towards her, and the two went out together arm-in-arm, down the broad staircase to the hall, from the hall to the street, where Maurice's cab still waited for them.

"I am faint and ill, Mattie," said Harriet, sinking back.

"Will you rest a while?"

"No—let us get home at once. How coldly and quietly you take this news, Mattie!" she said, looking intently at her; "ah! if you had only loved him like me all your life!"

"If I had!" murmured Mattie, "*this* would have broken my heart!"

"Hearts don't break with joy, Mattie, or I should not see another morning."

"No. You are right—not with joy!"

CHAPTER V.

STRUGGLING.

Had Harriet Wesden been less disturbed by all the trials of the day, she might have wondered more at Mattie's manner, and have guessed more shrewdly at the truth. But she had suspected unjustly; and feeling now that Sidney loved her, and had always loved her, there were dissipated for ever all bitter memories. It was Mattie's turn to change, but Harriet did notice it at that time; Mattie had become distant, grave; in the first shock of the real truth—though Mattie had seen it advancing, and thought herself prepared to meet it—it was impossible to smile and feel content. Harriet was anxious that the old friend should stay with her in Camberwell for a while, but Mattie was firm in her refusal.

"I must get home—I am very weary!" she murmured.

So they had parted, and Mattie had returned home to offer the great news concerning Sidney, and then escape to her room and be seen no more that night. What happened on that night—what resolves, what struggles, we need not dwell on here; she was one who had been injured—the best of women come in for the greatest injuries at times—and it was not a night's thought or struggle which could set her right. She was a heroine, but she was a woman—and women brood on matters which affect the heart for a long, long time after we have been deceived by their looks.

Mattie did not blame Sidney; she saw how far he had been led to deceive himself, and how far pity and gratitude had betrayed him; she knew that he considered himself bound to her still, and that only her word could release him from his. She felt that he was miserable like herself, and she fretted impatiently for the day when she could let him go free to his sphere, and to the only woman whom he had loved.

But the change had not been good for her; she was not resigned yet; her heart was in rebellion. Life before her seemed a dreary vista—a blankness on which no light could shine; ever in the world ahead, she traced her figure plodding onwards without a motive in life, or a hope that had not been lost in it—from first to last, only in various disguises, and on different roads, ever the Stray!

Was she better off now than in the old, old days when she walked the London streets bare-footed, and sang or begged for bread—even stole for it once or twice? No one had loved her then, or taken

heed of her; a few had pitied her at that time, as they might pity her in this, if she were weak enough to tell her story to them. Her father would pity her, but did he love her, she thought gloomily? She was not inclined to do him justice in that dark estate of hers; he had never wholly understood her; she had become a necessity to his existence, and he was grateful for it, as Sidney had been grateful —nothing more! Yes, she stood alone—for the love and generous hearts around her womanhood, she might be on a mountain top, with the cold, unsympathetic winds freezing her as she lingered there. Almost with regret she looked back at the past, and wondered if it had been well to save her from the dangers that surrounded her; she might have fought against them, and grown up more ignorant perhaps, but more loved. In a different sphere she would have made different friends, and known nothing of this *genteel* life, where there had been no happiness, and much trouble and remorse!

Hence, by noting Mattie's thoughts, we arrive at the conclusion that this was Mattie's darkest hour; that a change had befallen her which time might remedy, or might harden within her to a wrong—it depended upon the forces brought to bear upon her, and her own heart's strength.

She had heard nothing of Sidney since the experiment in a direct manner. Maurice had met her father in the streets, and informed him that all was progressing well, and Sidney was gaining ground rapidly—that had been "information enough for the Grays," Mattie thought, a little bitterly; there was no occasion for further visits to out-of-the-way districts, now the banker's son could exult over the result of his scheming! From Harriet no news had reached her, and Mattie had not sallied forth in search of her. The day on which Mattie was to have made up her mind and answered Sidney came and went without anyone taking heed of it. When would the sign come that he remembered her?—what would he do and say when he was well again?—what would he think of *her?*

Mr. Gray did not observe any particular change in his daughter; she was graver and more thoughtful, but he attributed that to her concern for Sidney's recovery. Once he was about to speak of Sidney's proposal to Mattie, and was asked almost imploringly to say no more; but he was not alarmed. Mattie was nervous still, and had not recovered the shock yet. She was his dutiful daughter whom he loved, and though her grave face did not become her years, still it was the face of a girl who took things studiously and reverently, and he was proud of it. Serious people suited Mr. Gray; his daughter was becoming every day more worthy of him, thank God!

Still there was one watcher on whom Mattie had not reckoned—a watcher who knew all the story, and guessed more than Mattie could have wished—to whom every change in Mattie was a thing of

moment, which affected her. This humble agent, who had watched thus, since the time Mattie was a child, had some inkling of the truth—hearts that have but one idol are sensitive enough. Through the stolidity, the inflexibility of Mattie, Ann Packet read the despair, and charged it with her honest force.

One night, when Mattie thought that the house was quiet for good—meaning by that, that her father and Ann Packet were in their rooms, and asleep—she was sitting by her little toilet table, dwelling upon a hundred associations, that all verged to one common centre, when a tapping on the panels of her door startled her.

"Who's there?" she asked. "Is that you, Ann?"

"Yes—let me in."

She demanded it as a right, rather than as a favour, but Mattie admitted her without opposition. Ann Packet entered with her cap awry—hanging, in fact, by strange filaments, to her back comb—and she placed herself in front of Mattie, with her arms akimbo, quite defiantly.

"Now what's the matter with *you?*"

"Have I complained?—Is there likely to be anything the matter, Ann?"

"Yes, there is. And you'll just tell me, please, what is it?"

"Ann, you forget yourself."

"No, it's you who is forgetting yourself, and me, and all you had a liking and a love for wunst. It's you as has altered so dreffully, that I can only think of one thing to make you different."

"Don't tell me!—don't tell me!" Mattie entreated.

Ann Packet took no heed.

"It's *him!*" she whispered.

Mattie did not answer; she went back to her seat by the toilet table, and turned her head away from the one faithful to her to the last. She was vexed that she had not kept her secret closer, and deceived them *all!*

"It's no good telling me it ain't him, Mattie—cos it is!" Ann Packet said, after following Mattie to the table, and taking another chair facing her; "there's nothing else—there can't be nothing else, girl. Well, I wouldn't grieve because his sight's come back—that's not right!"

"Do you think I grieve for that?" cried Mattie, fired into defence; "oh! Ann, how can you ever think so badly of me!"

"Then you're afraid that he won't like you any more?"

"How do you know he ever liked me or said he did?"

"I—I guessed as much."

Ann Packet we know possessed a secret as well as Mattie.

"You guessed wrongly."

"I guessed what you did, Mattie—there!"

"I am not always in the right, Ann" was the hard answer; "I

am a foolish woman, ever ready to drop into the snare of a few fine words!"

Ann scarcely understood her; but she went on resolutely—

"You think he's tired of you—that it won't come right now. Why not?"

"Nothing can come right out of nothing," said Mattie, passionately, and not too clearly; "I can't be worried like this, Ann. I have nothing to tell you; I am what I have always been. If there be a difference, it is only that I am getting older, and more world-worn. Won't you believe me?"

"No, I won't. I think I know you well enough by this time, and aren't to be *done* by any reason short of what's a true un. Oh! Mattie gal, you're not happy; you, who have done so much for happiness to tother people—and this shan't be, if I can help it! You and Mr. Hinchford must get married; and if there's been a quarrel, *that'll* mend it."

"Mr. Hinchford and I will never marry, Ann."

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"I don't see why," said Ann, reflectively.

"Mr. Hinchford will marry Harriet Wesden—they are old lovers and true ones."

Ann Packet looked fixedly for a while at Mattie, and then burst forth:

"Let him! Pr'aps he's fitter for her than you, if he's weak-minded and babyish, and can't tell what's best for him. Let him pack up his traps and go—you can do without him." Ann Packet, carried away by the feelings of the moment, went on, in a higher key, "You're too good for him and the likes of him, and ain't agoing begging because a pink-faced gal is set afore ye. You're young yet. You've people to love you and take care on you—you shan't be lonely, and you shall get over all your disappointments and be as happy as the day is long. It isn't for you, Mattie, to fret yourself to death because a little trouble's come, and you can't shake it off yet—you'll show 'em that you've never been a fretting, and that you've got a consolation yet, that their goings on can't take away!"

"Well, Ann, where would be your consolation?" asked Mattie.

"Where you taught me to find it, big words and all—where you will never lose it, Mattie, good as you've growed."

There was something touching in the manner with which Ann Packet snatched from the toilet-table the little Bible that always had a place there, and laid it suddenly in Mattie's lap. Mattie shivered, even cowered somewhat at the demonstration; it had been unexpected at that interview, and for the first time in her life Ann Packet took the vantage ground, and Mattie looked up to *her*.

"When you turned good, Mattie," said Ann, "you turned to *that* —you read it to me, and tried to make me read it, telling me that there was comfort to be found there for my loneliness. *I* found it—so will you child. *You* can't miss what you found me!"

"It does not follow," murmured Mattie.

"Yes it does," said Ann, who would not abate one jot of her assertions; "with *you*, who ain't like tother people, and who never was. You liked tother people better than yourself, and so got posed upon—but you're all the better for it—lor bless you!—you'll see that in *there*. And, Mattie, there's your father and me, still—we shan't drop away from you. The likes of me," she added, after a little more reflection, "isn't much to brag on, but you'll find me allus true—that's something."

"Everything!"

"You ain't like me, with no one to look to—with no one but you in all the world that would do me a good turn if I wished it ever so. With you there isn't one but'd go anywhere to help you, knowing what a contented soul you are. And when it comes to you, allus so cheerful, getting mopish—you, who finds somethin' good in things that others fret at, and makes us warm and comfurble instead o' shivering with fright—why, it's sixes and sevens all a topsy turvy anyhow, and no one to look up to nowhere!"

"I must come back to my old self, if I have wandered from it so much that your honest heart is touched by the change, Ann," said Mattie. "Perhaps I have been gloomy without a cause—perhaps you are right and I am wrong—though I don't confess to all your implications, mind—and from you I can bear to hear my lesson better than from others at this time. Ann, I'm not going to break my heart."

"God bless you! I knew that."

"I'm going to be just my old self again—nothing more. Not quite that suddenly, but finding my way back, as it were. There, you'll leave me now—to think."

"Only to think?" said Ann, with a wistful look at the holy volume in her lap; "it's too much thinking that has done this harm."

"To think what is best, Ann," said Mattie, rising, "and failing that, to pray for it; there, leave me now. Don't fear for me ever again."

"And I have not done wrong in talking of all this—you were angry when I first comed in, Mattie?"

"I am glad that you came now—I must have been aging very rapidly to have alarmed one who always had such trust in me. It's all over now!"

When Ann Packet had withdrawn, Mattie clasped her hands together and cried again, "It's all over!" as though for ever some hope had been dismissed rather than some fear. Hopes and fears

had perhaps gone down the stream of time together, and it was impossible to arrest the sighs for the fair blossoms which had been once. But she was stronger from that day; Mattie was not likely to harden, and it had only needed one warm-hearted counsellor to turn her from the wrong path she was pursuing. The right counsellor had come—a humble messenger, but a true one; one to whom Mattie could listen without shame.

"I was never fit for him—in this new estate, I might have brought him shame rather than happiness—and it was his happiness I tried for, not my own!"

She sank down on her knees and prayed as honest Ann had wished. But she did not pray for the best to happen as she had promised. She knew what was best for her and others—so far as it is possible to know that—and she asked for strength to do her best.

CHAPTER VI.

SIGNS OF CHANGE.

Mr. Gray, though he had not remarked any change that was prejudicial to his daughter Mattie, was quick enough to detect the new difference in her manner. He knew then that she had not been "her old self," as Ann Packet had termed it, by the old manner which was now substituted. She was more gentle, less distracted, kinder in her way altogether, more thoughtful of what his requirements consisted, and which was the best way to expedite them. If she smiled with an effort still, *that* he did not remark; he felt the benefit of the change and was content with it; he knew no reason why there should be any effort in her looks.

He expected to hear all on the first day that Mattie had received good news of Sidney Hinchford; that he was quite well, perhaps, and coming back to his old home for a while—coming back to settle *that* engagement. He did not suggest the name, however; he waited for suggestions. Mattie had shown that she was tenacious on that question of engagement, and far from disposed to state her ultimate intentions. He could afford to wait, knowing that all was well!

In the evening, his forbearance was rewarded by Mattie speaking of Sidney. She knew that to hold that name for ever in the background was unnatural. She was anxious to keep it a well-known name, and not shrink at an allusion to it, as though she feared to think of Sid, or would consign him for ever to oblivion.

"It's almost time we heard how Sidney was, father," she said.

"Ah! it is. His cousin said that we should see him very shortly."

"It depends upon the doctor, I suppose," said Mattie; "he has promised to obey Doctor Bario implicitly."

"That's the reason, doubtless," said Mr. Gray; "well, I shall be glad to hear from him; a long silence between friends is always unsatisfactory, and often leads to unsatisfactory results. We shall hear from him very shortly, I feel certain. That young man, his cousin, might have called; I have much to tell him about his future course in life, if he will only listen to me. I mark progress in him, and he must not falter in the narrow way."

Mattie thought that Maurice Hinchford might have called more frequently if it had not been for the good advice that lay in wait for him, but she did not tell her father so. Her father meant well, and she seldom attacked his "best intentions." He was a man who had done much good—chiefly in a darker sphere than his own, where hard words are wanted for hard hearts—and she respected his opinions. She had not understood him very quickly—such men are always hard to understand—but she knew his genuineness, and it was not difficult to love him.

"What should I have done without him in this strait?" she often thought; and for his presence there—showing that there was some one to love, and some one who loved her—she was deeply grateful.

"Every day I expect visitors now," continued Mr. Gray, "and think it very singular that no one calls. You will be glad to see Sidney, Mattie?"

"Very glad."

That same evening a letter arrived for Mr. Gray, informing him that the elders of his chapel would be very glad to see him on the following afternoon—a letter that turned the subject of discourse for that day, and took Mr. Gray away upon the next. During his absence the visitor arrived.

Mattie was in the shop, when Maurice Hinchford entered, walked at once to his high chair, and assumed his customary position there. Remembering what had happened since then, Mattie winced somewhat.

"Good afternoon, Miss Gray," he said, shaking hands with her. "Given up for lost, and considered the most ungrateful of human kind, I am sure?"

"No, Sir."

"To tell you the truth, we have had a bother with that cousin of

mine. He's so horribly obstinate, we don't exactly know what to do with him."

"He's no worse?" asked Mattie, eagerly.

"Worse!—he's so much better that we cannot keep him quiet. We locked him up a week in the dark, and then gave him light in homœopathic doses—globules of light, in fact—and so brought him round to a natural state of things. He is told to be cautious, and we catch him writing a letter to you, and we foil the attempt, and get sauced at for our pains. Then he wants to come back here directly, on business, he says; and we take him *nolens volens* to Red-Hill, and lock him up in our rooms there, with my sisters to see after him during our absence, and at length he is pacified a bit, and resigned to country air."

"Have you come at his request, Sir?" asked Mattie.

"Yes. I promised faithfully to call to-day, and assure you that he is nearly well, and will shortly surprise you by a visit. He is very, very anxious to see old friends. That's my commission; and now, Miss Gray, about this conspiracy of ours—will it succeed?"

Mattie drew a long breath, and then prepared herself. She knew where his interest lay, and how unconscious he was whither her thoughts had drifted once, but she was prepared to meet all now. It was for every one's content, save hers. Only herself shut out from the general rejoicing in the cold ante-room wherein no warmth could steal!

"It will succeed, I think—I hope."

"Yes, but how are we to begin?"

"Harriet Wesden and Sidney must meet and explain all that they have thought concerning each other—that's all."

"Ah! that's all! Quite enough, considering how difficult it is to bring them together. Difficult, but not impossible, Miss Gray; we shall skim round to the proper method in due course. Harriet Wesden's appearance roused him, did it not?"

"I think so. Has—has he ever spoken of it since?"

"A very little—he's plaguey quiet on matters in that quarter. He was very anxious to know what he said when he saw her, what she said, and you said; and after he had got *all* that he wanted, you might as well have tried to elicit confidence from an oyster. I try every day to bring the topic round, but he dances away from it, or curtly tells me to shut up. And now, may I ask a question?"

"If you will," said Mattie, a little nervously.

"What does Miss Wesden think?—you have seen her very frequently since the meeting at Doctor Bario's?"

"On the contrary, I have not seen her at all."

"Miss Gray! Miss Gray!" he said, reproachfully, "you are not working heart and soul with me! Here are two human beings who love each other, and will never be happy without each other, and we are letting time go by and harden them."

"I thought that Miss Wesden would have called here, and that we might have proceeded on *our* plan with less formality. But if she do not come shortly, I must visit her."

"Thank you—just sound her, if you can. She's a girl that will not be ashamed to own what impression the meeting with Sidney has made upon her; and after that we'll set to work in earnest."

"I will write to her this evening, asking her to spend an hour with me."

"Ah! that's a good plan—looks better than calling. Now I will just tell you how we might manage to bring Sidney and her together—you're not busy?"

"No."

"Nor I. I have given myself the whole day to mature this plan, and if you consider it feasible, why we will carry it out, and chance the *dénouement*."

He tilted his chair on to its front legs, and leaned across the counter to more closely impress Mattie with his logic; at the same instant the door opened, and Mr. Gray entered and gave him good day.

"Pleased to see you, Mr. Hinchford; you bring good news, I hope, of my absent partner?"

"The best of news, Sir," answered Maurice; "your daughter will tell you how well he is progressing, and whither we have taken him. You are at home for the day, I suppose, Sir?"

"Yes—will you step into the parlour, and take a quiet cup of tea with us? We shall be proud of your company, and I shall be glad to have a little talk with you afterwards."

"Thank you, I have not dined yet, and—and I am very much pressed for time to-day, or nothing would have given me greater pleasure. Some other time, I hope, I shall be more fortunate. Please excuse this hasty visit, but business must be attended to.—Good-bye, Sir—good-bye, Miss Gray—how late it is, to be sure!"

And backing and bowing politely, Maurice Hinchford reached the shop-door, darted through it, and dashed away from his tormentor.

"That young man is always in a terrible hurry," said Mr. Gray; "a good man of business, with a knowledge of the value of time, I daresay. Still he should not give up serious thoughts for thoughts of money-making entirely. I hope to find him more at his leisure shortly."

But Mr. Gray never did. Maurice Hinchford reformed, but it was after his own method, not Mr. Gray's; and being a fair repentance, we need not cavil at it. He was ever truly sorry for that past, and all the wrong that he had done in it; he sobered down, fell in love once more, and in "real earnest;" married well, and made the best of husbands and fathers. The reader, who will meet with him no more on this little stage, whereon our characters are preparing to make their final bows, will I trust be glad to hear of Maurice Hinch-

ford's better life, and to forgive him all his past iniquities. He has been the villain of our story; bad enough for real life, but in these latter days scarcely villain enough for the pages of a novel. Let us take him for what he is worth, and so dismiss him from our pages.

Father and daughter went into the parlour.

"Now let us hear all about Sidney," Mr. Gray said in the first place.

Mattie told him all that she knew, and he listened, rubbed his hands one over the other complacently, and exulted, like a good man as he was, over the well-doing of others. He indulged in a short prayer also for all the goodness and mercies vouchsafed to Sidney; and Mattie, who had never become reconciled to these sudden and spasmodic prayers, yet joined in this one with all her heart.

"Now," said he, suddenly assuming his everyday briskness, "for *my* news. But in the first place, don't excite yourself, Mattie—because it ends in nothing."

"Indeed!"

"I am not fond of exciting situations, and therefore I begin with the end, in order that I may not be excited myself. The end is, that I declined their offer, Mattie."

"What offer?"

"We'll come to that next. They wanted to see me at the chapel—there's a great scheme a-foot for a further extension of the missionary project; they want a very energetic man for Africa—just such a man as I am," he added, with that old naïve conceit which set well and conveniently upon him, because he spoke the truth after all; "and they've altered their opinion of that other man, who, if you remember, stepped into my shoes some time ago."

"Yes, I remember."

"But they were too late—I told them so. I said that though my daughter was about to marry and have a home of her own, yet I had learned to love her so dearly that I did not care, in my old age, as it will be presently, to begin life afresh without her. I thought that I could do my Master's service here as elsewhere, and that I would rather give up that good chance than give up you, and go away for ever."

"For ever!—why?"

"I was to settle down at the Cape—minister at a chapel there that will be completed before the next vessel arrives—and I felt too weak of purpose, Heaven forgive me, to leave you altogether."

"And you declined?"

"Yes, firmly and decisively Perhaps it was wrong."

"Go back, then, at once—don't lose a moment, lest they should think of another man whom they can put in your place!"

"What!—what!—what!" he cried, jealously, "you wish to get rid of me like that?"

"No—to go with you—share your life and labours there—be happy with you!"

"Mattie!—what does this mean?"

He held her at arm's length, and looked into her tear-dimmed eyes; he read the truth at last there, and, though unable to account for it, he folded his stricken daughter to his heart, and even wept with her. A man who had known little of earth's romance, or of the tenderness of life, and yet who understood it, now it was face to face with him, and could appreciate the loneliness of her whose life had become linked with his own.

"So," he said, at last, "you do not—you do not love Sidney well enough to become his wife?"

"Yes, I do. I love him too well ever to make him unhappy by becoming so, and standing between him and one he loves so much better than me. Some day I will tell you the whole story—explain it more minutely—you will spare me now, and keep my secret ever?"

"Ever," he responded.

"He will never know how I have loved him, therefore his memory will not be embittered by thinking that I—I felt this separation very much. I shall give him up—that's all! I don't think that he will care for any explanation—and after that, I should very much like to go away with you to a new world."

"Beginning life anew, and leaving all old troubles behind us—well, if it must end like this, so much the better, Mattie!"

Mattie was silent for a while, then said suddenly—

"You will go back now, and tell them that your daughter is anxious to go with you—to serve you there, and be your faithful servant in the good work lying before us both."

"If it's certain that you——"

"Father, there can be no alteration in *me*."

Mr. Gray took up his hat again and prepared to depart. He would have liked to attempt consolation to his daughter, but he felt, probably for the first time, that his efforts would have resulted in no good—that she was already resigned, and that the utterance of trite aphorisms would only unnecessarily wound her.

He departed, and Mattie, true to her old business habits, took once more her place in the shop. She was glad that there was no business doing that afternoon—that Peckham in the aggregate was undisturbed with thoughts of stationery. She could sit there and deliberate upon her plans for bringing Harriet and Sidney together—they must be happy at least, and she must not go away from England uncertain about their future. Two old sweethearts, whose liking for each other had only been temporarily disturbed—for whose happiness she had made many efforts, and did not flinch at this one. After all, she thought their happiness would be hers—and she should go away content.

Then there rose before her that future for herself, and she could see in the new life, in the new world, that which her father had prophesied. All the old troubles would be left behind on the old battle-ground; she would make up her mind to that, and thus life would be different with her, and happiness for her, perhaps, follow in due course. She had no idea of being unhappy all her life, because she had discovered that Sidney Hinchford's heart had been true to its first love; on the contrary, she was certain now that she should get over all her romantic difficulties in a very little time. At the bottom of all this was the woman's pride to be above all petty sorrowing for those who had never really loved her,—as she deserved to be loved,—and that would keep her strong, she knew.

Afar, then, she saw herself happy enough in the new world—with the familiar faces of her father and Ann Packet to remind her of the old. New friends, new pursuits, new incentives to do good, and defeat evil at every turn of her life—her young life still—with scope for energy and a fair time given her, not entirely alone, and never unloved, there would be nothing to disturb, and much to gladden, the future progress of the stray.

When her father returned in the evening, he found her very anxious to learn the result of his second journey to London.

"Where you in time?" she asked.

"Yes. It's all settled, my dear."

"I am very glad of that," she murmured; "there is no uncertainty about our next step."

"No—we must see Sidney now, dissolve partnership, and put the shutters up, Mattie."

"We must write to him in a day or two about the partnership—I would prefer that they know nothing of our intentions until the last instant—until we are ready to go—perhaps until we *are* gone. I don't think I could stand up against all their good-byes and best wishes—I would rather go away quietly, with you and Ann."

"Ann?"

"We must not forget her."

"She'll never go to the Cape, my dear—she can't go to Finsbury to bank her wages without hysterics, now."

"Because she's nervous, and I don't go with her," said Mattie.

"Ah! I see—you're right, my child. Ann Packet will have no fear about accompanying *us*. And she'll make a much handier servant than a Zulu Kaffir."

"And we'll go away quietly," said Mattie again.

"Yes, my dear, if you wish it. I object to anything in the dark, but as it's for your sake, I promise."

"Thank you," whispered Mattie.

Whilst Mattie was writing a letter to Harriet Wesden, as she had promised Maurice Hinchford, Mr. Gray broke the news to Ann

Packet, and impressed secrecy upon her. Ann Packet was asked to state her wishes, and Mattie looked up from her desk and smiled at the old faithful servant.

"Anywhere's you like," said Ann, without a moment's hesitation; "black men or brown men—I suppose they're one or tother there—won't matter anythink to me. I am too old to care about the colour on 'em. And, Miss Mattie"—she always called our heroine Miss Mattie in Mr. Gray's presence—"whilst you're at your desk, do'ee give notice at my bank about my money."

"Plenty of time, Ann," said Mr. Gray; "we shan't leave here for two months yet, at least."

"Then give 'em two months' notice," was Ann's rejoinder. "There's thirty-seven pounds nine and sevenpence halfpenny in there, and they may as well be told to get it ready for me. If they've been a speccilating with it, it'll give 'em time to call it in."

CHAPTER VII.

RETURNED.

Mattie dispatched her letter to Harriet that same evening; in her epistle she expressed surprise that they had not seen each other since the meeting at Dr. Bario's—should she visit her, or would Harriet walk over to Peckham to-morrow afternoon? She would be entirely alone, her father had business in town to attend to, and she was very anxious to see her old friend.

Mr. Gray's business in town did not take him from home till twelve in the morning; prior to that he went to work at his stock. When he returned home, he would endeavour to write a few lines to Sidney Hinchford; and whilst he was thinking what he should say, and whilst, despite his efforts to keep these thoughts back, they would intrude upon his figures, and throw him out in his accounts, Sidney Hinchford himself walked into the shop and stood before the counter, waiting for his partner to look up.

Mr. Gray, unmindful of Sid's propinquity, still bent over the

books on his counter, and scratched away with his pen; Sidney, with his glasses on—the old Sidney of Suffolk Street days—stood very erect and still, smiling to himself at the surprise he should create.

Mr. Gray looked up at last.

"God bless me!" he ejaculated, and swept pens, ink, and account books on to the floor in his amazement, "it is you then!—it *must* be you!"

"It looks like me somewhat, I hope," said Sidney, laughing and extending his hand, which the other warmly shook.

"Yes," said Mr. Gray, "and what a time it is since we have seen you! We were beginning to think that you had quite forgotten us."

"I never forget my best friends," Sidney replied, "and you and Mattie are the best that ever I have had. Did Mattie think that I was likely to forget her?"

"Well, not exactly," said Mr. Gray, "and if you'll wait a moment I'll run up stairs and call her——"

"No, you'll stay here," said Sidney, firmly; "don't disturb her on my account. I shall see her presently, and I want to enjoy the luxury of her surprise. Besides, there's no hurry."

"Isn't there?" Mr. Gray asked dreamily.

"Why should there be? I'm here for good."

Mr. Gray had just stooped to pick up his books and inkstand; he dropped them again at this, and then emerged like a phantom above the counter once more.

"You don't mean that?"

"This is my home again. *They* were very kind to me at Red-Hill, but it wasn't like home, and it never felt like home to me. After Maurice had left for London this morning, I told them my mind very plainly—it's no good telling that harum-scarum fellow anything—expressed my thanks, my gratitude for all that they had done for me, packed up and came away. I was unsettled, dissatisfied, unhappy, somehow—and here I am."

Mr. Gray sank behind the counter again, this time to hide his confusion, which, it was evident, was visibly expressed on his countenance. Sidney back again! Sidney, without preliminary warning, once more entering his home as a friend who expected to be heartily welcomed, and as a partner whom he had no right to ask to go away! Mr. Gray did not see his way very clearly to the end; Sidney's "straightforward" habit of doing things had completely discomfited him for the nonce. He must take his time, and think of this!

He re-emerged from his hiding-place, and laid the *débris* he had collected on the counter.

"I was taking stock when you came in, Sidney," he said; "just seeing what each share would be, and so on."

"Indeed! what was that for?"

"Why, you—you are going back to the bank again as clerk. I believe you promised that," said Mr. Gray.

"When my sight will allow me—that will be in a month or two's time—I shall return to the old life, God willing. But what is that to do with taking stock?"

"We shall give up this partnership together, of course."

"I don't see why," said Sidney; "I shall still want a home after business-hours, and there is no home but this that I shall ever care for. The business has not become so large an undertaking that Mattie and you cannot manage it."

"No, it's not that."

"And when—when I am married, we can talk about giving it up then, or making it over to you, or anything you like," said Sidney—"and so we'll dismiss the subject."

"For the present—we shall have to talk of it again. Mattie and I are tired of it, and have thought of something new, Sidney. But, we'll explain all presently. Mattie, I have no doubt, would rather tell you herself."

Sidney looked surprised, even discomfited. He did not comprehend the hint which Mr. Gray had thrown out; he did not entirely see the drift of Mr. Gray's conversation, or understand very clearly what was the difference in his partner's manner, which rendered his return something more than an agreeable surprise. He thought that he had discovered the solution to the mystery, and said,

"Old friend, you are vexed at my long silence; you have been harassing yourself—perhaps Mattie and you together—about my anxiety to get away from here, after God has pleased to give me back my sight. And I have been struggling and scheming to get back, and escape the kindness of my relations! Why, Mr. Gray, this will not do—this is not like you to mistrust true friends, and think uncharitably of them after their backs are turned! You should have known me better, and have had more faith in me by this time."

"My dear Sidney," exclaimed Mr. Gray, "I have never had an uncharitable thought towards you. I knew that you would always think well of us—that—that you were not likely to forget us. Until yesterday, I have been building upon your return here, and thinking how happy we should all be together."

"Until yesterday—what happened yesterday?"

"Mattie will tell you, Sidney—I cannot—I must not."

"Very well, we will wait," said Sidney, gravely; "there is nothing she can tell me which I cannot explain away."

"Are you sure?" was the father's eager question.

"Sure," he answered; but there was something in the tone which wavered, and Mr. Gray fancied that he detected it. He said no more, however; he was glad to see Sidney disinclined to elicit

further information. Sidney paced the shop once or twice, looked round it, and then went into the parlour, without waiting for Mr. Gray's invitation, and looked carefully and curiously round the room also.

Mr. Gray followed him.

"I see the home for the first time, if you remember," said Sidney; "here, in the darkness a fair life was spent, thanks to you and *her*. Here you both first taught me that there was comfort even in affliction; and here stood by my side, and fought my battle, two dear friends. What has altered them?"

"Nothing has altered their love and esteem for you, Sidney," said Mr. Grey; "whatever happens, you must believe that."

"And what has altered my love and esteem for them?" was the quick rejoinder.

"Nothing, I hope—I believe."

"Then let us settle down in our old positions here. I have come in search of peace and rest; of the old comforts which my uncle's grandeur could not give me, and which by contrast only rendered me more restless. I find them here, or nowhere. I take my stand here and expect them, or the disappointment will be a bitter one. This is home!"

He took off his hat, and seated himself by the table—a home-like figure, which Mr. Gray felt was in its place again. He leaned his forehead on his hand, and looked down thoughtfully—an old position in his blindness, which Mr. Gray had often watched, and which drew again more forcibly the heart of the watcher towards him. That heart might have been a little estranged since yesternight; it had borne no malice, but it had thrilled a little at his daughter's confession, and the thought had crossed it that Sidney Hinchford might have spared Mattie an avowal of such weak love as had been borne towards her. Sid had guessed Mattie's secret, perhaps, and taken pity upon her; he was generous enough for that, but he had forgotten that Mattie was not humble enough to accept it. Mr. Gray could almost believe now that all had been a mistake, which Sidney's presence there would satisfactorily explain; and yet Sidney's thoughtfulness and restlessness forbade it.

Sidney looked towards him suddenly.

"What are you thinking of?"

"Of the change in you, Sidney—and of the home that it really looks again for a little while."

"For a little while," echoed Sidney; "oh! you will not explain—call Mattie, then, and let us end this. I always hated mystery," he added, a little peevishly.

Before Mr. Gray could cross the room to fulfil his partner's commands, the door opened. Mattie entered, and paused upon the threshold with her hands to her quickly-beating heart.

"Sidney here—at last?" she faltered forth.

"Yes, at last," he said, advancing towards her; "*at last*, as your father has said, and now you. I have returned to find that you have both lost confidence in me, and both misunderstood me cruelly."

"I hope not, Sidney."

They shook hands together, and looked one another long and steadily in the face.

"It is upwards of a year since I have seen you, Mattie. It is the same hopeful, earnest face, that I have ever known—can there be a difference in me?"

"No, you are unchanged."

"You both thought that I had forgotten you?"

"No."

"You must prove it by your old ways, then; or I shall never think this place the dear home I left a month ago."

"You have come back to——"

"To stop! Why not?—don't you wish it?"

"I—I will tell you presently—give me time, Sidney."

"I am in no hurry," he answered, coldly.

There *was* a difference then!—they were inclined to resent his long silence, by something more than a rebuke; they would not understand that he had been kept away against his will, by his doctor's orders, and that he had been cautioned not to write or read, or test his sight more than he could help. They had not been satisfied with his messages sent by Maurice Hinchford; they *had* mistrusted him! It was all very strange, and intensely disheartening; he could have trusted them all his life, and he had believed that their faith would last as long as his. Presently they would know him better, see that he had not wavered in one thought or purpose, which he had formed before his sight came back; but the consciousness that they had formed an estimate unworthy of his character, would remain with him for ever, and no after-kindness, and fresh faith, would obliterate it from his memory. There was an anxious silence; then the father's and daughter's eyes met.

"I think that I'll run into the City now," he suggested, feebly. He scarcely liked to leave his daughter at this juncture; but he knew her strength, her power to explain, and her wish that he should go. It did not seem natural that he should leave her with that strange young man, and, after he had risen to withdraw, he hesitated again.

He went slowly into the shop, and Mattie followed him.

She had read his thoughts correctly, for she said at once—

"I shall not give way before him. I am firm and cool—feel my pulse, it does not throb more quickly because I have to tell him that I will not be his wife. Before you come back it will be all over, and I shall be waiting for you—the calm, unmoved daughter, that you see me now!"

"There'll be no scene, then?"

"All commonplace, and matter-of-fact—I will have no scene," she said firmly.

"Then I'll go. God bless you, my child!—if I couldn't trust you implicitly, I wouldn't move a step."

He went away, and she returned to the parlour, where Sidney had been sitting, a watcher of this whispered conference.

"Now, Mattie," he said.

Mattie sat down a little distance from him, and their eyes met steadily once more, and flinched not.

"Now, Sidney!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"DECLINED WITH THANKS."

It had come at last, that day of explanation. Mattie would not give way therein; she had long prepared for it, prayed for strength to sever all past ties, and leave him ignorant, if possible, of her real thoughts concerning him. Whatever happened, she would be firm, she thought; and now with Sidney before her, she did not feel that she should waver. An artificial strength it might be, but it would support her throughout that interview, whatever might be the reaction after he had passed from her sight, never to see her again, if she could hinder him.

Ann Packet, who had been out on divers errands, stepped into the shop at this juncture, marked the occupants of the parlour, and went immediately behind the counter, to attend to business during that interview, and confuse the accounts inextricably, supposing that there was any business likely to drift that way just then.

Mattie and Sidney had the little room all to themselves, and there was no likelihood of being disturbed. "Now, Mattie"—"Now, Sidney," had been said between them, and then each waited for the next words—as a duellist might wait for the sword's-point aimed at his heart.

Mattie spoke first. It was evident that Sidney Hinchford would have waited all day.

"A few days before you went away from here, Sidney," said Mattie, "you asked me a question, and I promised that in good time, and with due consideration, I would reply to it. Do you wish that question answered now?"

"I have come for it," was the reply.

He knew by Mattie's manner what that answer would be, and he steeled himself to meet a cold rejection of his offer. All was part and parcel of the new incomprehensibility upon which he had intruded.

"More than once, Sidney, I have thought of writing my answer to you, but have found the difficulty of putting all I wish to say into words that would not look cold and indifferent to the great honour you would have done me."

"This is satire," he said, hastily.

"Forgive me, it is not intended for that. I would not wound you by a word, if I could help it. And it was an honour to *me*."

"I deny it," he answered, warmly.

"Ever before you and me that past which there is no shutting from us—which would have been talked about, and have often brought the blush of shame to your cheeks for my sake. Ever before you what I have been—what I am fit for!"

"Fit for a higher station than it is in my power to raise you—no position is too elevated for a good and pious woman. All this is argument which I thought that I had combated long since—pardon me for adding, all this foolish reasoning, utterly unworthy of you."

"Still——"

"It is no reason for declining my hand, Mattie," he interrupted, with some sternness, "it is simply an excuse."

Mattie winced for an instant, then her quiet voice, firm and even as the way she had chosen for herself, replied to this—

"Let me proceed, Sidney. You will hear me out fairly, I am sure."

"Why not say 'No' at once?—you mean to tell me that you do not care to be my wife, and share my home. Is not that your answer?"

"Yes—but I cannot let you think that I have been insensible to your offer, or not weighed it carefully in my mind before I thought that it was not right that I should marry you. Sidney, had it pleased God never to have restored your sight, I would have been your faithful wife, serving you as I alone was able, perhaps, and rendering you content with me."

"I see. You would have taken pity on my loneliness—with that strange idea of being grateful for past kindnesses of a trivial description, you would have sacrificed your happiness in an attempt to attain mine. Mattie, it would have been a terrible failure."

"No."

"I say a terrible failure, which would have embittered both lives in lieu of promoting the happiness of either. I should have discovered the motives which had placed you at my side, and felt too keenly the encumbrance that I was upon you."

"I think not!—I am sure not!"

She was anxious to defend herself, to hold her best in his estimation yet, but she feared the betrayal of her secret. She could have told him how, for a few fleeting days, she had pictured her greatest happiness to be ever near him, striving to brighten every thought, and vary the monotony of every hour—sustaining, comforting, and worshipping. She could have told him of the affection of a whole life that had been spent in thinking of him, praying for him; but she held her peace, and let him think that she had never loved him. In the end, she saw that it was best to turn him from his purpose.

"I would have married you, Sidney, in affliction—out of gratitude, if you choose to word it so, but a gratitude that *you* would have never known from love," she ventured to say; "but now, when the new life, to which you will shortly turn your steps, is far removed from mine, when you require no help from me, and when there are others, fairer, better, and so much more worthy of you, I cannot hold you to a promise of which you must repent."

"Why?"

The position by some means had become suddenly reversed. It was she who had to speak of his pity and gratitude for her.

"Because you would discover that I was not fit to be your wife, that you had not sought me out of love, but out of kindness towards me for my services. You had pledged your word in one estate, and you would keep it in another, like an honest man valuing a promise he had made, and resolving to go through with it to the end, at whatever cost to his own better chances. Therefore, Sidney, you must understand that I cannot be your wife for pity's sake—that the man who is to become my husband, must love me with all his heart, and soul, and strength, or he may go his way for me!"

"I said that my romance had died out long ago. That I was too old, and had experienced too much sorrow to talk like a lover in a novel."

"It seems to me—I do not know, Sid—that true love must belong partly to romance. It is too pure—too full of fancies, if you will—to mingle readily with business life; it is too deep down in the heart to rise to an every-day surface—it is full of sacrifice as well as love. All this my idea, not yours, Sidney—I who would at least be romantic in that fashion, and would care for no one but a romantic lover."

"You have altered, Mattie—you are talking like a school-girl

now. If that be another reason for refusing me, it is unworthy of you."

"It is another reason, for all that," replied Mattie; "let me dismiss it at once, if you are ashamed of it. You have come hither oppressed—burdened, I may say—with a sense of duty to me; let me raise the load from you by saying, that I will not be your wife. If I would have married you even out of pity myself," she added, a little scornfully, "I will not take a man for a husband who would have had pity upon me!"

"Very well," he answered, moodily.

"As your wife, never—but oh! Sidney, as the old friend and sister, always! Don't think ill of me because I cannot see my way to happiness—don't think that there is any difference in me, or that I value you less than I ever did. You understand me?"

"Scarcely, Mattie—you have altered very much."

"You must not think that—I have not altered in any one respect—I would be ever your friend, ever hold a place in your heart, ever be remembered as the poor girl who would have died to make you happy!"

"But would not have married me for the same purpose," answered Sidney, in a kinder tone; "is that it, Mattie?"

"My marriage with you would have rendered you wretched—don't deny it again, Sid—I am sure of that!"

Hence your answer. Well, if it must be, I will rest content. I will believe that it is all for the best."

"Let me tell you another reason—the last—why I would not answer 'Yes' to you. May I?"

"I am interested in every reason," he said.

"Because you were bound to another whom you loved once—*whom you love still.*"

He sprang to his feet, and then dropped back into his place, as though shot at by a pistol.

"Do you believe that I would come here with a mask on—a robber and a liar?"

"Not intentionally, Sidney; because you have fought hard to keep the old love back, and to believe that it was gone for ever. You have fostered that idea by thinking uncharitably of *her*, by turning away from that true happiness which only marriage with her will ever bring to you. You are a man who has never changed; and in attempting to live down the past, have but more clearly discovered the secret of your life."

"What—what makes you think this?"

"I cannot explain it, but it is as true as that you and I will never marry one another for love, for gratitude, for anything," she answered. "Harriet Wesden and you should never have parted, but have understood each other better, and had more faith. You turned from her, and her pride kept her apart from you;

but, Sidney, through all, and before all, she holds that love still."

"I cannot believe that."

"Your cousin Maurice has told you so—now let me. You will never be happy without her—do justice to her, if you are the Sidney Hinchford whom I have ever known. Sidney, you *do* love her—are you not man enough to own it?"

"I love her as one who is dead to me—passed away out of my sphere of action, and never likely to cross it again!" he answered. "I have always thought so—I would have told you that these were my thoughts, had you asked me on that night I sought your hand. She was dead to me—gone from me—some one apart from the girl who lives and breathes in her place."

"That was romance—and that *was* love!" cried Mattie quickly; "for she was not dead, her love was not dead, and you were likely to meet in better faith at any moment unforeseen. Sidney, you *did* meet—you were affected by her visit, her evidence of the old tie still existent. Why deny this to me, to spare my feelings now! I am living for you and her,—I do not love you, but I am interested in your welfare, and anxious—oh! so anxious, Sid, to advance it."

"Harriet Wesden and I met under peculiar circumstances, that must have touched both hearts a little—all was over in an instant, like a lightning-flash, and here's the sober life again!"

"You *will* deceive yourself until two lives are wholly blighted by your obduracy, you will go on asserting this dreamy theory, and believing in it."

"You are a strange girl—stranger and more more incomprehensible to me than you have ever been, Mattie," he said wondering. "What can you think of me, that you coolly ask me to sit here and confess to a passion for another, after coming for an answer to a love-suit tendered you? By Heaven! it is a mystery, or a dream!"

"When I was a little girl, untutored, and run wild, I used to fancy that you two would marry; when we shared the same house together, I saw how fitting you both were for each other—how, in your strength of mind and purpose, one weak woman would always find support and love. When you were engaged, I felt a portion of your happiness, understood that you had chosen well, and knew—knew how proud and happy she must be in your affection! That was *my* dream—let it in the end come true, for Harriet Wesden's sake, for yours—even for the sake of the woman here at your side, the sister and friend to tell you what is best."

"You are very kind, Mattie, but—but I cannot own to anything. It is not fear, not shame—God knows what it is, or what I am, or what I really wish!" he exclaimed irritably.

"Leave it to me."

"No, for myself, my own battles. I will have no woman's in-

terference, no friend's advice. I will go on to the end my own way."

"It is not ordered so. Look there—is this *chance* which has brought her hither to-day, at this hour?"

"Let me go away!" cried Sidney, starting to his feet.

Mattie, flushed and excited, caught him by the wrist; he could have wrested himself away from her grasp, but he would have hurt her in the effort, and a something in his own will held him spell-bound there.

His sight was weak yet, and though he had guessed to whom Mattie alluded, he could but dimly distinguish a female figure advancing toward him, as from the mists of that past sphere of which he had spoken. It came towards him slowly, even falteringly at last; and he remained motionless, awaiting the end of all that might ensue on that strange day.

It was the past coming back to him, to make or mar him. He shivered as he thought of all the folly he had committed, if, after all, Mattie and Maurice were right, and even his own heart had misled him. He was a man whose judgment had been sound through life—why should he have erred so greatly in this instance?

"Mattie—Mattie!" gasped Harriet, on entering, "what does this mean?"

"That Sidney has been waiting for you," said Mattie, quickly, "to thank you for all past interest in him. Shake hands, you two, and let me—let me go away!"

"No, no, don't leave me, Mattie! You must remain. I have been ill. I—I am very weak."

"If you wish it, for a little while. You two are not enemies now—let me see you shake hands, then?"

The old sweethearts shook hands together at Mattie's wish, and then stood shyly looking at each other, each too discomfited, even troubled, to say a word. Mattie had one more part to play before she could escape them.

CHAPTER IX.

MATTIE, MEDIATRIX.

Harriet Wesden was strangely afraid of the old lover—what he would say to her in the first moments of meeting, whether he would speak of the past in which she had been misjudged, of the present hour which had brought them face to face, or of the future for them both, and what it would be like from that day.

She was afraid to speak, afraid to trust herself with him, and she clung closer to the skirt of the old friend, a child still in moments of emergency, as she had ever been. Sidney Hinchford stood perplexed, amazed—what could he say in the presence of the woman to whom he had been talking about marriage?—what dared he say were she even to leave them to fight out their explanations their own way?

Mattie read the fear of one, and exaggerated in her imagination the reserve of the other; even then all might be marred, and all her efforts end in nothing, if she were not quick to act.

"I asked Sidney, as you entered, Harriet, if it were not something more than chance that brought you two together to-day—that brought him hither in particular," she said; "I think it is—I trust that from to-day a brighter life opens for you both. Why should it not?—you who have kept so long asunder from each other only require an honest mediator to pave the way for a fair explanation. Both of you will have faith in Mattie!"

Neither answered, but Mattie did not take silence for dissent.

"When Sidney was blind, Harriet, the thought did cross me once or twice that I had better marry him and save him from his utter loneliness—and I think that he was desperate, and would even have married me! When Sidney or I relate this story some day, we three shall have cause to laugh at it heartily, and think what a narrow escape we all have had—even I, who have never been able to understand Sidney like yourself—as you know! I have only seen, Harriet, that this Sidney of whom we are speaking has become a desperate man, soured by contact with himself, and full of vain regrets for much trouble that his own rashness has brought on him—that he wants one true friend to aid him now more than ever he did!"

"Pardon me, Mattie, but you must not speak for me," said Sidney blushing; "if I have injured Miss Wesden by any hasty action, I will explain it, and take my leave of her and you."

"You will explain, of course," said Mattie; "and if you part again after that explanation, it will be your own faults, and I will never have confidence in either of you any more. For you two—both friends and benefactors, whose childish hands were first held out towards me—I must see happy; I have striven hard for it, and I hope not to find this last disappointment the keenest and the heaviest. Remember old days, and the old hope you had together in them."

"Mattie, you must be a very happy woman some day!" cried Sidney, "you think so much of making others happy."

"I hope I shall," said Mattie cheerfully—almost too cheerfully, save for those two pre-occupied ones from whom she hastened to withdraw. Harriet Wesden made no further movement to stay her; she sank into a chair, covered her face with her hands, and trembled very much; in her heart was a strange fluttering of fear and hope, and the struggle for pre-eminence was too much for her.

Yes, she was a weak woman—not strong and resolute, and with the will to conquer difficulties like Mattie; but still a woman very lovable and beautiful, and with a heart that was true enough to all who had been ever cherished therein. From the moment that she had understood it, it never swerved from Sidney Hinchford; it had known its greatest trial when Sidney turned away from her, sceptical as to the reality of any love for *him*.

She had doubted his love for her until that day when Mattie came to draw her into the old vortex, and then her faith in him came back, and life took fairer colours—she knew not wherefore, save that the reflex of that day's brightness might have shone upon her from the distance. For it was a bright day for both these old lovers; Mattie had argued well that one explanation—a few words, true and gentle, that scarcely stood for explanation even—would be sufficient, and disperse all clouds that had hung heavily above them. Both had had much time for thought and regret—both had found little solace on the paths of life they had pursued, and looked back very often at the life they had given up together.

But the worst was over, and the fairer time—the old love, almost, if that were possible—was coming back once more. Sidney had believed it, when Mattie had stolen into the shop and closed the door upon them; he had felt all his old love return at Harriet's appearance, at her fear of him; at her strange, half-sad, half-reproachful look towards him when they had first met that day; he knew, then, how wrong he had been, and how rightfully Mattie had read him—what love he bore to the weak girl still, and what a poor substitute for love he would have offered the stronger, *better* woman. Will our readers think that Mattie Gray was worth a dozen Harriet Wesdens?—that Sidney made a bad choice, and that the hero—if we dare call him so—should have married the heroine according to established rule? Or will they believe, with us, that he made his

proper choice, and that Harriet and he were the most fitting couple to live happy ever afterwards? If he did not treat Mattie as fairly as she should have been treated, it was an error of judgment on his part, and we are all liable to errors of a similar description. He believed that he was acting for the best; he had taught himself in the first instance to believe in his love for her, and when he had awkened to the truth his honour would not let him draw back, until Mattie's pride had released him. Later in life he fancied, once or twice, that he caught a glimpse of the real truth, but he kept the idea to himself, like a sensible man; he had succeeded in life and was his cousin's partner then—perhaps more conceited than in the old days. And if Mattie suffered for a while, why heroines are born unto trouble, or where would be the subscribers to our story-books?

This was Mattie's great day of suffering—for ever to be remembered as a landmark standing out sharp and rugged in life's retrospect. No one ever guessed half the terrible battle which she fought that day; and how she came forth smiling and victorious, with the deep wounds hidden, lest her distress should affect others who were happier than she.

When she returned to that room again, they had forgotten her, as they had forgotten all the doubts, fears, jealousies, harsh words that had stood between them, preventing their reunion. They were lovers again, and were happy once more—for the first time, since he had taunted Harriet with pitying *him*, as Mattie had taunted him that very day!

Mattie forgave them—asked to be forgiven for intruding on their reverie, and bringing them back to thoughts of others sat down with them, and listened to their stories of what their future was to be—to really be this time!—and how, in their generous hearts, they had built a plan for Mattie's share in it. They saw only Mattie's effort to bring them together, nothing else, in that hour; and they were very grateful, and not selfish in their joy.

"To think that it has all ended as you wished it at last—as you have prophesied it would end!" said Harriet; "and to think that I even mistrusted you at one time, and was cold towards you, who sacrificed so much for me in the old days."

"*In the old days!*" thought Mattie.

"It makes a great difference when one is unhappy," said Harriet; "we look at things sceptically, and are mistrustful of all good intentions."

"For a while!" added Mattie.

"Ah! for a while!" repeated Sidney, "for we are three together now in heart, and there is no mystery or misconception in the midst of us. For ever after this—the sunshine!"

* * * * * * * * * *

Sidney and Harriet were there when Mr. Gray returned; they spoke of their reconciliation, and Mattie's share in it, and he listened very patiently, betraying but little animation at the recital. He was more anxious to speak of giving up the business, having other views, he said—and still more anxious to see Sidney, the young man whom he had loved like a son, and who had done such irreparable mischief, out of the house. He knew Mattie would have to endure more, if Sidney called that place home ever again; and Sidney, who thought of the natural embarrassments which would attend his further stay there, was ready to return to Red-Hill, and his uncle's home, after he had accompanied Harriet to her father's.

They were gone at last, and Mattie and her father were facing each other. Mattie's face was white, and her lip was quivering just a little as they went out together.

"Courage, Mattie," he said, "we shall not give way now. We have fought well and the worst is over."

"Yes, the very worst!"

"You will not envy them their happiness—two weak addlepated mortals, only fitted for each other. You will keep strong!"

"For ever after to-day. But you must not be too critical with me now that he is gone, and I have no longer any occasion to keep firm. Oh! father, I loved him very, very much!"

"It is hard to lose him, I know that," said he, as Mattie flung herself into his arms, and wept there.

"Harder to think that he never loved me after all!"

"Courage!" he repeated, "God knows what is best for you. He will bring you peace, I am sure!"

And in good time, when Mattie was young still, the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, rested on her, and rendered her content.

CHAPTER X.

CONCLUSION.

Linger not, O novel-writer, at the helm when the ship sails into the harbour, or your readers will escape you. When the end is known, and the facts and fancies pieced together, remarks are wearisome. The lovers have made it up, and good fortune awaits them; *bon voyage!*—what's the next story, who writes it, and is the heroine fair or dark, ugly or handsome? The readers are off to fresh leaves and pastures new, in much the same hurry as playhouse folk, who scent the conclusion and the tag, are scrambling over their seats whilst paterfamilias is giving his blessing to the young couple, who haven't agreed very well till the last two minutes.

Who would care at this late stage for Mr. Wesden's surprise at his daughter's companion, or for his delight at things "coming comfortably round?" The end is known; there is no room for fresh disasters—Sidney Hinchford marries Harriet Wesden, and there's an end of *that* book!

And yet there is another scene with which we would fain conclude—those readers who are in no hurry will be tolerant of our prolixity. It is a fair picture and we will very briefly sketch it whilst our guests retire.

A scene on shipboard—the ship outward-bound—the new minister and his daughter standing on the deck, exchanging farewell greetings with visitors that had surprised them by their presence there; Ann Packet with her money sewed in her stays, in the background. Two months have passed since the events related in our last chapter—the partnership has been dissolved, the business sold, friends taken leave of in a very quiet manner by Mattie, who knows that it is for ever, and yet would deceive them all by an equable demeanour, and a talk of going away for a little while.

The task is beyond her strength, and she betrays herself a little, and suggests doubts, which resolve themselves to certainties, and lead to this.

She is glad that they have found out the truth; she would have spared herself a little pain, but lost a bright reminiscence—it is as well to say "Good-bye" honestly and fairly, and not steal away from them in the dark, and leave her name finally associated with a regret.

They are all there who have ever cared for Mattie, or been

indebted to her. Sidney Hinchford and Harriet, and Harriet's father, very feeble now, and more inclined to stare over people's heads than ever. They are gently upbraiding Mattie for her vain deception, and speaking of the sorrow they feel at losing her. The tears are in Mattie's eyes, and she trembles and clings to the stout arm of her father, whilst she offers her excuses.

"I had not the courage to look you all steadily in the face and say that I was going away for ever—I preferred to see you all one by one, as though nothing was about to happen to separate us, and to leave to the letters, which are already in the post-office, the last news which you have thus forestalled."

"You speaking of want of courage!" said Harriet.

"I am stronger now—I am glad now to see you all—I can bear to say good-bye to you."

She says it well and stoutly, too, when the time comes, and friends are warned to let the ship proceed upon its course, and not delay it by their presence there. With Sidney, facing him with her hands in his, she gives way somewhat; she let's him stoop and kiss her—for the second time in life—the last!

"God bless you, Mattie!—best of women!" he murmurs.

"God bless you, Sidney!—with this dear girl!"

She flings herself into Harriet's arms, and cries there for a little while—there is no jealousy now—Harriet is the little girl of old, old days, the first of all these friends she has learned to love, and is learning now to part with.

"To lose *you*, Mattie—the friend, sister, counsellor, whose good words and strong love have kept me from sinking more than once—it *is* hard!"

"In a few months, a wiser, better, and more natural counsellor than I—trust in each other, and have no secrets—don't forget me!"

Thus they parted—thus hoping for the best, and believing that the best had come for all, Mattie is borne away to the new world, wherein her father had prophesied would come new friends, new happiness. And they came; for Mattie made no enemies in life, and won much love, and was rewarded for much labour in God's service, by that good return, even on earth, which renders labour sweet and profitable.

THE END.

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